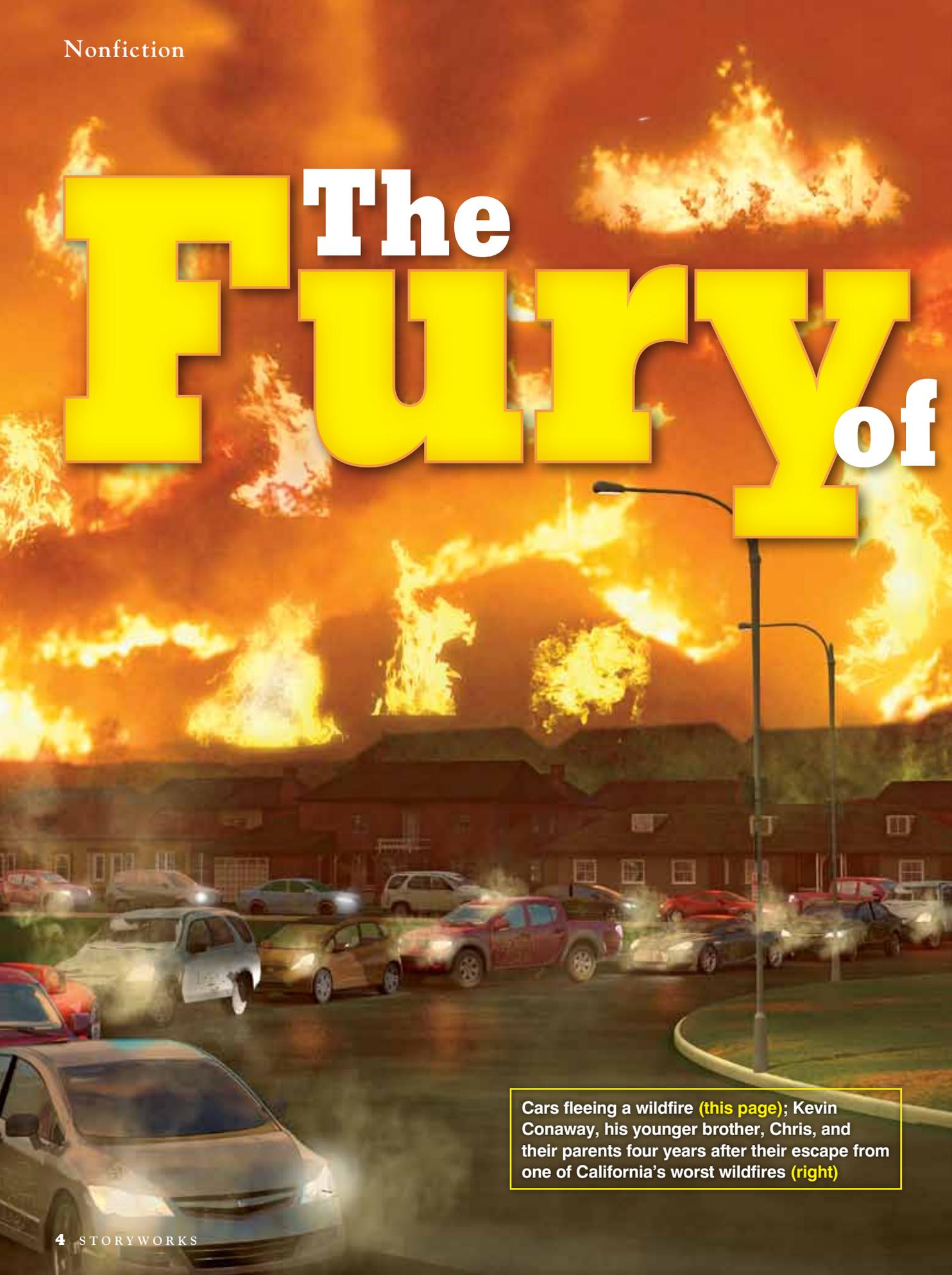


The Fury of



Cars fleeing a wildfire (**this page**); Kevin Conaway, his younger brother, Chris, and their parents four years after their escape from one of California's worst wildfires (**right**)



Fire

One family's terrifying wildfire story

By Kristin Lewis

At 3:30 a.m. on a fall morning in 2003, sixth-grader Kevin Conaway was jolted awake by his mom, Diane. "Get up," she said. Her tense face was barely visible in the darkness.

Immediately, Kevin noticed a powerful, choking smell coming through the open

window. And then he realized what it was: smoke.

What happened next is a blur. Kevin's mom handed him a flashlight because the power was out. She told him to wait in her room with his 4-year-old brother, Chris. Dazed, Kevin did as he was told. He had no idea what was going on out there in his town of Valley Center, California. Clearly, there was a fire. But where was it? And how close?

While Kevin waited with his brother, his parents went outside to see what was going on. On the main road at the end of their street, they came across a spooky sight: a long line of cars, all heading in the same direction, stretched as far as they could see. Everyone was **fleeing**.

Kevin's parents could hear the fire roaring like a train in the distance. The air was thick with smoke. But there were no alarms, no flashing lights, no firefighters with hoses. Kevin



Illustration: Chris Short; Courtesy of Diane Conaway

and his family were in the path of the deadliest series of wildfires in the history of California. And they were completely on their own.

Blistering Skin

Wildfires are **treacherous**. These fires start in the wilderness, often fueled by dry plant life and wind. Within minutes, a few **embers** left at a campsite can grow into a huge fire. Wildfires can move at speeds of up to 60 miles an hour, as fast as a car on the highway. They burn as hot as 2,600 degrees Fahrenheit—hot enough to melt gold. The front of a wildfire is an invisible wave of heat that blisters skin and turns hair to ash in one second. After four seconds, clothing bursts into flame. And this is all before the actual blaze arrives.

Wildfires occur on every continent except Antarctica. In the U.S., California has the most. Every year, fire crews put out hundreds of fires long before the flames can move into areas where people live.

The wildfire that woke Kevin, however, was different. It was far more dangerous than anything California had ever seen.

No Warning

In fall 2003, dry weather conditions in San Diego County were ideal for a big fire. It wouldn't take much to start one—a single spark from a forgotten campfire, a cigarette dropped by a careless hiker, a lightning strike.

On October 25, 2003, a man lost in Cleveland National Forest, east of San Diego,

Storyworks First Person

“Not a Pretty Job”

Jeff Crandall, leader of the Southern Rockies Wildland Fire Module, knows how it feels to battle a raging wildfire

Fighting a wildfire is **grueling** work. We carry 50 to 60 pounds of food, water, and equipment on our backs in 110-degree heat, covered head to toe in protective gear. Some days we hike up to 3 hours through **rugged** terrain to get to the fires, work 13 hours doing intense physical labor, and then hike another 3 hours to get back.

We have a saying about how close we get to the flames: “One foot in the black, one foot in the green.” We stand half in the already burned, blackened area and half in the untouched green land as the fire approaches. Our lives are always on the line, and I've had to rescue firefighters from helicopter-crash sites and recover bodies. It's not a pretty job.



Crandall at work

Fires have some pretty weird causes. A few years ago, one huge fire started because of a squirrel that chewed through a power line. The squirrel got zapped and burst into flames!

Wildfires can be destructive, horrible things. But they're also part of nature. Often my job is to let fires burn—that is, when no people are at risk. Fires create space for new growth, supply important nutrients, and clear away old underbrush. Many people might be surprised to know that a lot of fires do nothing but good.
— as told to Justin O'Neill



Every year, an average of 8 million acres of land are burned in wildfires. That's the size of the state of Maine.



lit a fire at sunset. He was hoping to signal rescuers. His fire quickly spread to the surrounding trees and plants. Within a few hours, flames covered 5,000 acres of land, destroying everything in their path.

Because it was fire season, firefighters were already prepared with extra workers and equipment. But things were about to get far worse than they had expected.

As fire crews set out for Cleveland National Forest, an arsonist started another fire 25 miles north. This fire, later named the Paradise Fire, was heading straight for Kevin's town. Valley Center had no warning system to alert its 20,000 sleeping residents. And with crews to the south already busy, few firefighters were available to rush to the scene.

In the Line of Fire

Kevin and his family had no idea that they were in the middle of an epic disaster—a series of fires that would later be called the Fire Siege of 2003. But Kevin's parents' instincts told them to leave the area at once. They did not waste time worrying about what to take with them. Kevin quickly gathered his guitar, his schoolbooks, and some clothes. He got the dogs and cats into crates. His mom grabbed water and food, and his dad loaded their three frightened horses into the trailer.

As the family piled into the car, black

smoke rose into the sky. They drove up and down their street, honking the horn to wake anyone who might still be asleep. All the while, the fire was getting closer and closer. Then they joined the line of cars inching away from the fire at a painfully slow five miles per hour.

Kevin remembers that he was not afraid. He didn't think that his house might burn to the ground, or that his family and friends were in serious danger. He had no way of knowing that the firestorm had already killed more than 10 people, or that entire neighborhoods had been wiped off the map.

Soon, 14 different fires were raging across Southern California. Some people died while trapped in their cars. Some did not wake up in time and died in their homes. One breath of the toxic air could suffocate a person. In the town of Lakeview, one couple survived by jumping into their swimming pool.

Lucy Nicholson/Reuters/Corbis; Jim McMahon/Magnum



A charred swing set (left); families rest in a shelter at a local airport after being evacuated (above).

The Long Wait

Kevin and his family made it safely to a restaurant parking lot on the other side of town. They stayed there for hours, confused and shocked, trying to figure out where to go next. Kevin tried to comfort his frightened cats. “There was so much uncertainty,” Kevin says.

Eventually, they found shelter at a friend’s house. They waited for days. The Conaways saw endless news reports of burning houses. They wondered if theirs was still standing.

In the end, it took more than 14,000 firefighters to extinguish the fires. By then, the blazes had **scorched** 750,000 acres of land, destroyed 3,710 homes, and killed 22 people.

At last, on October 29, the roads reopened. It was finally safe to go home. When they pulled onto their street, Kevin saw the most comforting thing he’d seen since the **ordeal** had begun: his home. Firefighters had arrived in time to save it. It was one of the greatest moments of his life. “That will always stay with me,” Kevin says.

Even though their house wasn’t damaged, Kevin and his family were saddened by all that was lost in the fire. Entire neighborhoods had burned to the ground. **Debris** littered the streets. Kevin’s middle school became a shelter for families whose homes had been destroyed.

Eight years later, Kevin still thinks about



the fire. But he also remembers how he and his family worked together with their neighbors to help each other, to clean up their town, to share clothing and supplies.

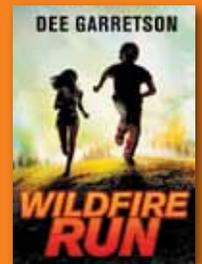
After all the smoke and fire and fear, lives began to heal. Families in Valley Center started rebuilding their houses. The town created an alert system in the event of another disaster. When more wildfires started in 2007, the system worked, and everyone was safely evacuated.

Nature also began to recover. New life sprouted from the ash. Within five months, bright wildflowers were blooming on the burned hillsides.

Nature was healing itself. 🔥

WRITE TO WIN!

What were the effects of the 2003 California wildfires? Write your answer in a paragraph with details from the article. Send or e-mail your entries to “Wildfire Contest” by Dec. 15, 2011. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *Wildfire Run* by Dee Garretson. See page 2 for details.



GET THIS
ACTIVITY
ONLINE

USE SENTENCE CHEF ON
THE NEXT PAGE TO HELP YOU!

WRITE A PARAGRAPH

Sentence Chef



Directions:

1. Read "The Fury of Fire." Then do the Sentence Chef activity below.
2. Use the color-coded boxes and lines as guides to help you write each part of the paragraph.
3. Remember to back up your statements by including information and details found in the article.
4. When you're finished, copy the entire paragraph onto a separate piece of paper.

THE PROMPT

What were the effects of the California wildfires of 2003?

Topic Sentence

The wildfires of 2003 in California had many different effects on people and nature.

Supporting Sentence 1

Describe one effect. (Hint: What happened to the people in the fire's path?)

Detail Sentence 1

Provide a detail about this from the article.

Supporting Sentence 2

Describe another effect. (Hint: What happened to the forest and land?)

Detail Sentence 2

Provide a detail about this from the article.

Concluding Sentence

Repeat the topic sentence, but in different words.