

Nick Norman throws a bucket of water on fire in his Altadena neighborhood, Jan. 8 in California. He, wife his Timithie, brother-in-law Mitchell, and others worked to protect their home and others amid ongoing fires in Altadena and the Los Angeles area. (Courtesy of Nick Norman)



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With spotty information about the rapidly spreading wildfires, and evacuation orders clearing out major swaths of the City of Angels, some Angelenos took matters into their own hands. Catholic school stalwarts Nick and Timithie Norman of Altadena were among them.

A neighbor whose house was about 70 feet from the Normans' texted a neighborhood group chain at 8:49 a.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 8.: "This is Mike. We are safe. Our house is gone. I went there this morning." When Nick asked the fate of the Normans' home, there was no response.

As of Jan. 15, an estimated 12,000 homes and other structures had been damaged or destroyed by the L.A. fires, with some 100,000 people displaced.



Timithie and Nick Norman are pictured with their daughters in a December 2024 family photo. (Courtesy of Nick Norman)

The Normans had evacuated after an initially quiet Tuesday (Jan. 7) evening family dinner that was interrupted by a neighbor banging on their door saying of the burgeoning Eaton Fire, "We gotta go! It's right over there!" They were sheltering at his sister's house in South Pasadena, safe with Nick's mother, wife, two daughters, and several siblings and cousins who didn't have to evacuate but provided a supportive, festive atmosphere. It was a fun gathering, under the circumstances.

But the suspense was too great. So on Wednesday, the couple slipped by police lines and roadblocks planning to find out if their home was still standing, grab a few sentimental items and split.

The skies were red and flames were licking the car as they drove up their beloved Concha Street at 9:30 a.m., Nick told EarthBeat. Their home was still standing, the western-most structure left in the neighborhood, which Nick said had perhaps eight houses left out of about 40. Otherwise, the street that had been their home since 2017 was now scorched and smoldering ruins.



On Jan. 8, Nick and Timithie Norman slipped by police lines and roadblocks to drive to their home to find out if it was still standing and grab a few sentimental items. As they drove up, they found their home was the western-most structure left in the Altadena neighborhood. (Nick Norman)

With fire on three sides, "We should not have been in there," Nick said. But their home was about to catch fire, so he looked at the house and said, "We can do this."

Nick, who teaches British literature to the 10th grade at La Salle College Preparatory School, started talking out loud to God. (Timithie Norman works in development at Mayfield Junior School Of the Holy Child Jesus, which Nick attended and their daughters attend now.)

"My relationship with God has always been one where he's like, 'How about this?' Poking me in the ribs and joshing me a bit. And I've always responded with loving irreverence, like, 'Are you kidding me? Come on man, help me out here.' " Nick said. "I knew that whatever happened I did the best I could and it's going to be OK."

With that, a sense of peace descended over Nick and they got to work.



Fire and damage is seen outside a window on Jan. 8. With fire on three sides, "We should not have been in there," Nick later told NCR. But their home was about to catch fire, so he looked at the house and said, "We can do this." (Nick Norman)

Joined by brother-in-law Mitchell and a few other hardy souls — some known, some unknown to them — the Normans grabbed everyday items like shovels, a bucket from a daughter's Halloween costume and whatever else they could find. The motley crew battled flames threatening their home and several others that had survived the previous night's inferno.

Someone came up with a chainsaw and said, "Got anything that needs cutting?"

There was no water service, so Timithie grabbed pickle juice and La Croix from the fridge and began pouring it on smatterings of flames.

A fence that Nick and a neighbor had built together a few years earlier was sending flames up to the eves of their house, so they took a shovel and knocked it down, out of flames' reach of the house.



Joined by brother-in-law Mitchell and a few others— some known, some unknown to them — the Normans grabbed everyday items like shovels, a bucket from a daughter's Halloween costume and whatever else they could find on Jan. 8 in Altadena, California. They battled flames threatening their home and several others that had survived the previous night's inferno. (Nick Norman)

Their freestanding garage was also burning. They knocked down its walls to sort of implode the hardened sides onto the flames, smothering them.

After a couple of hours, the Normans' home was saved, and they moved on to others. For ten hours they battled the fires. Nick says they didn't see a single firefighter until the end of their efforts, when the homes that could be saved were already safe.

As night fell and Timithie headed back to the kids, the next hazard — other than a resurgence of fire and wind that could yet doom their home — became clear.



The Normans and others battled fires for ten hours on Jan. 8 in their neighborhood in Altadena, California. (Nick Norman)

"That evening I stayed behind because there are looters," Nick said. "I did the American thing, I got out my shotgun and sat on the porch. And did patrols about every 90 minutes" with some like-minded neighbors. Would-be looters materialized

but "they saw me and then they left," he said.

The next day, some sheriff's patrols "came around and shared info on looters they had seen and suspicious cars," and gave a heads-up that there were five or six sheriff's cars patrolling.

Nick did not feel reassured, taking that as a signal that remaining residents were on their own. Apparent looters surged, "driving up in cars with no tags and peeling rubber to get out when they saw me," Nick said.

Some boldly videotaped the neighborhood as though casing homes and even took video of Nick. He decided to leave because "it was clear they were getting more organized and brazen."

Today, as of the time of this reporting, the Normans are uncertain if their house is still standing or fell to another round of fire. "There's continuing danger. The fire's supposed to whip up again at any minute."



Nick Norman told NCR they didn't see a single firefighter until the end of their efforts on Jan. 8, when the homes that could be saved were already safe. Remains in the neighborhood are pictured in a photo taken that day. (Nick Norman)

He has seen satellite imagery that suggests it may have survived, but presumes "it's completely ransacked."

The National Guard has since blockaded the area, he said. When Nick visited the line of demarcation to see about another visit to their home, a guard member told him that if he snuck into the area he would be hunted down and arrested. Neighbors have been told by the government that they hope to begin cleaning up in six to eight weeks, which means they may not know the fate of their home for more than a month.

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Fortunately, Nick says they got their daughters in to see the house and grab some favorite items before the iron curtain fell, enabling the girls to see for themselves and hopefully at least partially demystify the situation for them. Meanwhile, the Normans are staying with Nick's grandmother in San Marino, where they feel they may be bivouacked for as much as a year.



Nick and Timithie Norman take a selfie in front of their home. They worked with others to save their home and others in their neighborhood Jan. 8 in Altadena, California. (Courtesy of Nick Norman)

Nick says he has mixed emotions on the saga, "I'm proud to say we did it on our own but I'm also a bit perturbed and dismayed to say there was no help," he said. "Most of the resources were in the Palisades at that fire. They can't distribute every resource equally. But the more cynical part of me says they have to protect the rich and famous instead of the common folks. I'm seeing very few pictures of burnt out

Corollas. It's mostly Teslas and Mercedes."

Outgoing President Joe Biden promised immediate aid.

On Tuesday (Jan. 14), Nick spent two hours on hold with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, to see what immediate aid might be forthcoming. While he's not giving up, the initial answer was that FEMA would provide nothing until it had surveyed his home, which remains off-limits.

"I'm sure there's more to the situation," Nick said, "but the initial response is infuriating and disrespects those who have property they cannot reach."

Related: LA fires inspire groundswell of Catholic aid