

The home of Trena Spurlock burns in Altadena, Calif., following the Eaton Fire, which began Jan. 7, 2025. Spurlock, a member of Sacred Heart Catholic Church's gospel choir, fled her home of 40 years with her dog, a Bible and her late husband's ashes before the blaze devoured her entire neighborhood in Altadena, home to a historically significant Black community. (OSV News/courtesy Trena Spurlock)

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ALTADENA, Calif. — February 6, 2025
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As a member of Sacred Heart Catholic Church's gospel choir, Trena Spurlock has sung the hymn "My Help" countless times.

But after the Eaton Fire, the words hit deeper.

Spurlock fled her home of 40 years with her dog, a Bible and her late husband's ashes before the blaze devoured her entire neighborhood in Altadena, home to a historically significant Black community.

While Spurlock copes with the tragedy, she finds herself repeating the words of the hymn, adapted from Psalm 121.

"It says, 'I will lift up mine eyes to the hills' and you know we are in the hills that burned," Spurlock said. "Then it goes, 'From whence cometh my help, My help cometh from the Lord.' That means he's not going to forget us. Beautiful."

Even though the flames that killed at least 17 people in Altadena are no longer a threat, the loss of community lingers — particularly for the city's African American residents, some of whom are Catholic.

For decades, Altadena has been a diverse hamlet that boasted higher than average Black home ownership, thriving Black small businesses, and churches with ministries that specifically serve Black Catholics. But now, in the wake of such devastation, local leaders recognize Altadena faces a daunting challenge: retaining its identity in the face of a very real chasm between residents' desire to stay, and the financial ability to stay.



Trena Spurlock, center, a member of the gospel choir at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Altadena, Calif., poses in an undated photo with her two children, Franqui and Bryce. Spurlock fled her home of 40 years with her dog, a Bible and her late husband's ashes before the Eaton Fire devoured her entire neighborhood in Altadena, home to a historically significant Black community. (OSV News/courtesy

Trena Spurlock)

Yet with faith there is hope, insisted Deacon Charles Mitchell, who has been active in the post-Eaton Fire relief effort.

"Black Catholics are a strong group and we will survive this," said Mitchell, who serves as a deacon of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church in Altadena and as treasurer of the Altadena/Pasadena Black Catholic Association.

Still, Mitchell said, "we also know this isn't going to be easy."

"The cost of housing has tremendously risen in the last 10 years. ... People may have to live nearby instead and that would really distort the history of Altadena," Mitchell told Angelus, the news outlet of the Los Angeles Archdiocese. "We ask those not affected to do what you can to help, and as always we ask for the grace of God."

Among those leading the drive is the LA Archdiocese's African American Catholic Center for Evangelization, or AACCFE. The nonprofit, which supports archdiocesan churches with predominantly Black parishioners, recently announced the launch of the Altadena Wildfire Victims Fund.

The idea arose organically at this year's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Prayer Breakfast, held the same week that the fires started, when someone picked up a vase and attendees started dropping in donations. By the time the event was over, $2,000 was raised. AACCFE leaders say they're aiming to raise around $10,000 before offering grants.

"Once the quick relief money is gone and the insurance money comes up short, we want to help people," said AACCFE director Anderson Shaw. "We want them to remodel, rebuild and buy in Altadena. ... If everyone leaves, the community structure starts to collapse."

That's a future that Spurlock said she cannot bear. Her family has been active in local Catholic circles since the 1950s. As a child, she attended both Sacred Heart Church and Primary School then went on to St. Andrew High School in Pasadena. Her two children, now adults, attended St. Elizabeth's School. After much prayer, the retired educator said she'll rebuild the home she shared with her son.

"Black Catholics are very rare," said Spurlock. "So when you find a community that understands you, has the capacity to worship the way you're used to, and has the same values, you want to stay connected, you want to go to church. ... I'm not walking away."

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Before the wildfire, Altadena had a Black population of 18% and a Black home ownership rate of more than 80%, about double the national average. The suburb grew in diversity following the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which banned racial discrimination in mortgage lending known as "redlining."

Dr. Horace Williams remembers those days. The retired pharmacist fought for equity in housing as a member of the Catholic Human Relations Council. He's concerned about losing what he so passionately fought for: middle-class neighborhoods for African American families.

"Real estate speculators are coming in with good offers and getting the properties. They'll be turned into expensive homes," lamented Williams. "The community will be changed. ... We need to put people ahead of profits."

Shaw is also concerned about bigotry from the very agencies that are supposed to protect homeowners.

"There is some bias in the system," said Shaw. "People make it more difficult for (African Americans) to qualify for monies. Insurance companies specifically will try to find reasons to deny them everything they need."

That's where advocates like Edwina Clay come in. As president of the Altadena/Pasadena Black Catholic Association and the Knights of St. Peter Claver Ladies Auxiliary, she's providing friendship and guidance to her fellow evacuees.

"I'm calling people, asking them what they need, then sending them in the right direction," said Clay, whose apartment was damaged by high winds. "We pray things are going to happen the way (officials) say they're going to happen, but in all honesty, who knows? There's some things we're going to have to do on our own."

Rebuilding the Black community is not only important for its members but important for the wider community including his parish, said Father Gilbert Guzman, pastor of Sacred Heart.

"African Americans have a rich spiritual history," explained Guzman. "They continue those traditions through Gospel music ... by celebrating Black History Month and Kwanzaa. They make a unique contribution here and are very strong in their presence."

Mitchell said that will never change.

"For those of us who remain, we will continue our traditions. Even if our numbers lessen, our faces, our activities, our involvement will be seen."