

# 25 Years Later: Reflections on the Cerro Grande Fire

## Documents and Memories

Tuesday, May 20, 2025



**LOS ALAMOS COUNTY  
COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS OFFICE  
MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** June 12, 2000  
**TO:** Council  
Joe King, County Administrator  
**FROM:** Laura A. Beckley, Office Manager *LAB*  
**RE:** Sample of the e-mail we received during the Cerro Grande Fire

Attached is a sampling of the e-mails I received in the County's public e-mailbox during the fire emergency.

There were many more, asking about information regarding friends and addresses which I responded to, but I thought you would like to see the general outpouring of care and concern we received from people all over the country.

**SAMPLE OF THE  
E-MAIL WE RECIEVED  
DURING THE CERRO  
GRANDE FIRE Memo  
by Laura Beckley, Los  
Alamos County Office  
Manager**

**From Los Alamos County  
Records**

I am so saddened by the loss of property and continue to pray that everyone is safe. I live in Oakland CA so we know of the horror fires can cause. I was wondering if the fire is heading towards Abiquiu? That is the home place of my ancestors.

**Selected emails collected  
by Laura Beckley, Los  
Alamos County Office  
Manager**

**From Los Alamos County  
Records**

God bless you for responding to us, and thank God for hopefully sparing my sister's and niece's homes in Los Alamos and White Rock. I know it will be a long and painful process to just get the smells of the fire out of every fiber in their homes, but again, thank God, they have a home to come back to and start work on the recovery process.

Our prayers continue for the unlucky families who are left with little or nothing of their homes and lives before the fire - but every cloud has a silver lining in that there were no lives lost...property can be repaired or replaced, but lives can't.

Please give all of the massive groups of workers who were so brave and dedicated in this tragic event. It does our hearts good to know that there are still so many wonderful people in this world who give of themselves to help others, AND our gratitude to these person's families who were also in fear for their beloved family members who put their own lives on the line for so many others.

Our city is sending help....with necessary daily supplies  
blankets...food...water....etc  
But mainly our prayers go out for everyone.....

To all the Citizens of Los Alamos:

Please accept my sincere condolences to my friends and acquaintances that have lost their homes and belongings. I want you to know that even though many of us no longer live in Los Alamos, you are a part of our lives and we feel the pain of your loss as well. I am trying to get enough information for the Class of 1969 so that we together as a group can do something to help with the rebuilding of a community that we love. If you have any information that would be helpful to me in this endeavor, I would certainly appreciate it. I know that when this e-mail is read it will not be of a high priority of action. However, I felt impressed to let you know that those of us who grew up in Los Alamos, have a special place in our hearts for the community, have a desire to help in any way we can.

thanks for posting the addresses of the structures that burned, (and by implication, those areas that are still considered, safe). I'm in the suburbs of WashDC and had no way connecting to friends and family that moved to Los Alamos.

Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of your community in this time of tragedy.

Our prayers are with everyone. It is our hope that you all will raise from these terrible dark depths. You are a very strong community, I know you, we saw that recently while house hunting there. Have faith in the Lord.

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# Old-timers might remember me as the “missing hiker” or “lost hiker,” but I was never lost.

Submitted by  
JEFF FAVORITE

On May 10, things were getting back to normal in Los Alamos. The morning was calm. LANL was closed, but other businesses were open.

At noon, I set out to get a look at the fire. I parked at the Mitchell Trailhead on Arizona. I hiked up Mitchell to Guaje Ridge Trail to Pipeline Trail and down to Quemazon Trail. From there, I saw the fire in Los Alamos Canyon. A little further, I found that the fire had crossed the canyon and was burning on the Quemazon Trail! I had to let people know, but I had no way to do so.



It was 3 PM. Of course, everyone in town already knew; the town was being evacuated. I was the last person to find out.

Having my route blocked by fire, I went back: up Quemazon, up Pipeline, and down Guaje Ridge toward Mitchell. From the ridge I saw the fire running east towards Arizona. When I reached Mitchell, I sprinted down. Unfortunately, when I arrived, the Mitchell Trailhead was on fire.



Going back up was terrifying. The fire was also climbing towards Guaje Ridge. It was spreading through blowing embers that started spot fires, and that’s what I was running through on my way up. I thought I might not make it to the top.

Finally, I reached Guaje Ridge. Instead of going up Guaje, I continued on Mitchell down to Guaje Canyon. When I had gone about ¼ mile, I heard a four-engine slurry bomber right over my head, very loud. I looked up and it was not a slurry bomber at all. It was the fire, also cresting Guaje Ridge, now also heading down the other side. I started running again.

I reached Guaje Canyon at 7 PM. I spent the night in the open area in front of the dam. I saw the fire in the trees above the canyon on the south side. When the wind blew, it flared up. I didn’t know if it would come to the reservoir in the night.

It didn’t. In the morning, I walked down Guaje Canyon to Rendija Trail and then Rendija Canyon, where a county worker picked me up.

## Fire Chronology

I learn something new every week about this fire and the efforts of those who contributed to the success of the firefighting and recovery of our community and citizens. This book touches on many of those stories; my focus here is on fighting the fire.

**Thursday evening, May 4, 2000:** At 1920 hours, NPS personnel conducted a prescribed fire on Cerro Grande Peak in Bandelier National Monument, approximately 10,000 feet in elevation. They planned to burn 300–900 acres. Ironically, one of the objectives was to lessen the risk of a wildland fire causing damage to LANL and Los Alamos. Fire behavior was erratic, winds were relatively strong during the night, and NPS requested USFS assistance. NO LIVES LOST.

**Friday, May 5, 2000:** Erratic fire behavior and increased winds around noon caused NPS to declare the prescribed fire as an escaped fire. NPS notified USFS that they needed more resources to contain the fire. They then notified LAFD of the situation and requested a water tender to assist at their western perimeter on State Road 4. LAFD provided the tender with two firefighters, and LAFD Deputy Chief Doug Tucker reported to the NPS command post located at the NPS cache at LANL's Technical Area 49. LANL and County emergency managers went to a higher state of readiness. I responded to the LANL Emergency Operations Center and the NPS command post for briefings and status reports. The fire continued to cause spot fires within the planned 900-acre area of the prescribed burn. NO LIVES LOST.

**Saturday, May 6, 2000:** The NPS Incident Commander called for a Type 1 USFS overhead team and additional USFS Wildland crews to assist NPS with the fire-fighting efforts. USFS began backburns or “burnouts” along SR 501. LAFD firefighters assisted USFS and began to prepare for a fire fight in Los Alamos. NO LIVES LOST.

**Sunday, May 7, 2000:** Spot fires burned in Frijoles Canyon, and there was a “blow up”—this erratic fire behavior caused NPS to declare the Cerro Grande a “wildfire.” The County and LANL activated their EOCs, and LANL issued an emergency closure for Monday. All LAFD personnel were called back to duty, and we assigned staff to task forces. NPS assigned LAFD Deputy Chief Doug Tucker to the Incident Command group, and LAFD Battalion Chief Juan Pacheco was assigned to Fire Operations. I began my long assignment at the LANL/County EOC. LAFD established a tactical operations center at Fire Station 1 for dispatch tracking and resource management; our administrative staff, the communications director, and a fire-training officer operated the “fire tac.” Mutual aide was requested through the New Mexico Fire Marshal at the State EOC. The Los Alamos Police Department evacuated the western area of Los Alamos and assisted evacuating USFS land at the American Springs and Camp May areas. Burnouts were conducted along Camp May Road (the road to the Pajarito Ski Basin) and SR 501. Winds increased to 30 miles per hour with higher gusts. At approximately 1830 hours, the first slurry drop was made on LANL. The Cerro Grande Fire grew to 1,253 acres. NO LIVES LOST.

**Monday, May 8, 2000:** LAFD personnel were actively engaged in firefighting, as the fire continued to spot on LANL property. In addition to fighting the fire here, LAFD began pretreating areas in town. LANL, County government, and the schools closed. More slurry drops were made, and helicopters worked the area. The Cerro Grande Fire grew to 2,000 acres. NO LIVES LOST.

**Tuesday, May 9, 2000:** The fire slowed after a cold front arrived. The USFS Type 1 Incident Commander took over command, as spot fires continued to erupt and LAFD continued pretreating in town. The fire lines were holding at this point, but more

**FIRE CHRONOLOGY**  
by Douglas R.  
MacDonald, Fire  
Chief, Los Alamos Fire  
Department

**From CERRO GRANDE:  
CANYONS OF  
FIRE, SPIRIT OF  
COMMUNITY. Los  
Alamos National  
Laboratory : 2001.**

**Monday, May 15, 2000:** Los Alamos County Administrator Joe King, Deputy Chief Doug Tucker, and I took a low and slow helicopter flight over the entire Los Alamos area to evaluate the fire danger. We concurred that the eminent danger to the public was low and authorized the repopulation of Los Alamos.

Eventually, the Cerro Grande Fire grew to 47,650 acres and included lands across the NPS, USFS, DOE, Los Alamos County, Baca Ranch, Santa Clara Pueblo, and San Ildefonso Pueblo. This was a one-billion-dollar fire, and the costs continue to climb. Approximately 429 Los Alamos families were displaced by the fire; 239 structures were totally destroyed in town. The programmatic issues at LANL are not even included in the usual cost figures. Postdoctoral students lost their lives' work, critical experiments were significantly affected, and structures were damaged or destroyed.

To fight the fire, we had approximately 2,400 firefighters: 100 firefighters and civilian staff from LAFD; 1,600 from the USFS; and 700 from the 66 New Mexico fire departments who sent aid at the request of the New Mexico State Fire Marshal. NO LIVES LOST.

### Recovery

One issue we faced after Los Alamos repopulated was identifying and confirming that all of the folks displaced by the fire were safe. Where were they? Were they all accounted for? For a week, I thought we would find a body in the ashes and rubble of the devastation. The thought of a lost life never left my mind until we confirmed that the whereabouts of all residents were known. NO LIVES LOST.

In an effort to assist the fire survivors, the County contacted individuals who had survived the Oakland, California, fire in the 1990s. The Oakland survivors helped the County form a more specific plan to assist the Los Alamos fire survivors through this tragic time.

## It started like any other day as a full-time technician for the New Mexico National Guard.

Submitted by  
TRAVIS JUNIOR

I was working, tools in hand, when our sergeant walked in and said something that changed everything: "Put away your tools, gather your things, and load up in the van." A fire was raging in Los Alamos, and we were being sent to help.

With nothing but the clothes on our backs and my empty lunchbox, we hit the road. The sky darkened with thick smoke. Traffic poured down from the hill—families fleeing, vehicles packed, some towing trailers. We were heading straight into it.



At the checkpoint, we were waved through without question. Full-time Guardsmen from different units, united by duty. We arrived at the Los Alamos Police Department and were assigned to assist local officers and the Air National

Guard. We were met with gratitude and treated well.

That first night was surreal—keeping watch, listening for looters or flames. Sleep was near impossible. Though I grew up not far from Los Alamos, I didn't know the streets well. We navigated through smoke and past homes reduced to smoldering shells.

The sun rose on a changed town. The devastation was gut-wrenching. I called my wife just to hear her voice and say we were okay. For days we worked long hours—patrolling, cleaning, fire watch. Though we had food and supplies, I was still in the same clothes I left work in. My wife met me off the hill with clean ones, and I offered to bring supplies for others too.

I had never seen such destruction. Cars melted into pavement. Aluminum wheels ran down the road. The fire didn't just destroy—it erased.

After about a week, residents returned by bus, hoping to find something left. Some homes stood, but many didn't. Even survival felt bittersweet. I remember the sadness in their eyes.

Eventually, we were called off duty and returned to our families.

The town may have healed, but the experience never left me. It wasn't just a fire—it tested who we were. We left with memories etched in smoke.



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## US—Russian Cooperation on Fire Fighting & Emergency Response

Submitted by  
PAUL WHITE

During those fateful days in May of 2000, amidst the smoke, the hasty departures, and the horrific images burning across TV screens, there were phone calls and messages from the other side of the world. Friends and colleagues in Russia – a very different Russia from today – reached out to inquire about our well-being and to offer help. Fortunately, our immediate emergency was over inside a week.

Barely a month later, Los Alamos scientists and engineers were in Sarov, our Sister City, for a pre-planned technical meeting at our 'sister laboratory,' Arzamas-16. On the margins of that 'official' gathering, and to an overflow audience of Russian lab and Sarov townspeople, John Ruminer gave a presentation summarizing the Cerro Grande fire. Out of that hastily arranged session was born a DOE-sanctioned program of technical



exchanges and cooperation involving fire-fighters, police and laboratory emergency responders. The focus of this effort was on methods for preventing and responding to fires near nuclear facilities.

After surmounting the many bureaucratic hurdles, the first full-scale seminar in this series was hosted in Sarov, in August 1991, by the city's Fire Chief Anatoli Kravchenko. In addition to Lab scientists, Los Alamos was represented by Chief Douglas MacDonald, Deputy Chief Doug Tucker, and Police Captain Wayne Brownlee. These technical interchanges proved very productive, and a reciprocal exchange was hosted in Los Alamos in 2003. Later meetings included successors to the original community leaders, including Chief Vladimir Rosanov of Sarov, and Los Alamos Chief Troy Hughes and Deputy Chief Justin Grider.

While relations between the US and Russia have soured over the past decade, this early 21st century period of cooperation demonstrated how experts from our respective cities and laboratories once joined forces to our mutual benefit – kindling warm friendships out of the tragedy of Cerro Grande.



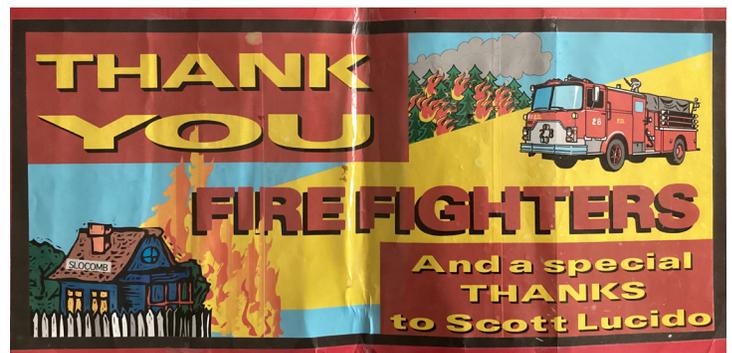
## I was a LAC firefighter and also lived in Los Alamos from 1990-2014.

Submitted by  
SCOTT LUCIDO

This anniversary of the Cerro Grande Fire is, as you can imagine, conjuring a flood of memories and a few emotions.

Sharon Stover and Larry Walkup hired me for my first position with LAC supervising the student summer hires at parks and recreation. ... At some point (I'm a little fuzzy on exact dates) during that first night, Captain Conrado Ruiz was of course rather dejected with our lack of effectiveness stopping the flames, and the question was, "How are we going to face the people " when this is over?"

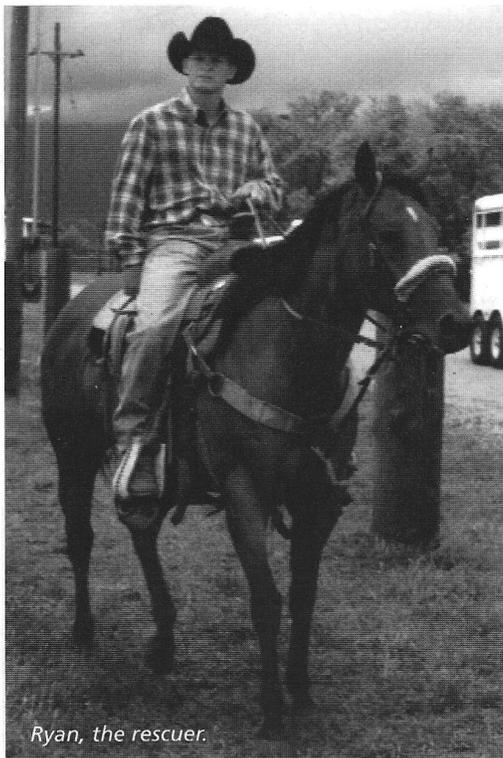
Did you know the kind citizens of Los Alamos donated money to the LAC firefighters? The money collected by the citizens was used to buy commemorative watches. ... Los Alamos was a great place for us and our family, we have many friends there and I miss the place and era."



## Fire rescue!—A hair's-breadth escape

Skipper, Sport, and Festus, (pictured) along with their pal Cheyenne, were four of the many lucky horses rescued from North Mesa stables during the Cerro Grande fire. They belong to Nancy Boudrie, X-DO Executive Office Administrator, her husband Richard, and their son Ryan. Nancy described the experience.

"I was very nervous about our animals on Monday night, May 8, so we decided to load all four of them into our rig and take them down to the Santa Fe Rodeo grounds. People were wonderful there! They allowed Los Alamos horses to stay free in their stalls during our fire. Early Wednesday afternoon, Ryan returned to the hill with his friend Travis to load a bunch of rodeo bulls that had been left behind at the Los Alamos North Mesa stables area and take them to a safe place in Española. The boys managed to get to the stables, load the bulls, and start down Rendija Canyon road when the National Guard stopped them and asked them to return to Los Alamos, after delivering the bulls, to take other horses to safety. Four horses were left on North Mesa whose owners had been forced evacuate without taking them. Ryan and Travis were their only hope of rescue.



Ryan, the rescuer.

"Well, the boys got back to the stables area, escorted by a National Guard car. They managed after great difficulty to get the four remaining horses loaded—apparently these animals were not used to getting into a horse trailer. The National Guard said they could no longer use Rendija road, so the guard vehicle escorted the boys, the rig, and the horses through the burning town. At 4:30 in the afternoon



Skipper, Sport, and Festus.

it was terribly slow going. They could barely see the escort vehicle for the smoke. Driving past 36<sup>th</sup> Street—where the Boudries live—Ryan saw the entire street in flames. 'Our house is gone!' he thought—as luck would have it, only the North wall of the Boudrie home was damaged.)

"When the rig came to Pueblo Canyon bridge, the Fire Department sprayed water on the vehicles as they crossed it because the flames were rising above the bridge on both sides! The heat was so intense that Ryan thought they were all going to die. As it was, the brakes on the rig partly burned out from the heat as they crawled down the hill and to Santa Fe Rodeo grounds. They finally arrived at 9:00 p.m. with their cargo of horses.

"We had a regular zoo there at the Rodeo grounds. We ended up with over 300 head of horses, many goats with babies, cats, kittens, rabbits and other pets. The support was unbelievable! About 2000 bales of hay and similar amounts of grain were brought in free for the animals' care. We are all forever grateful to our Northern New Mexico neighbors who helped us and our animals through this dreadful experience." X

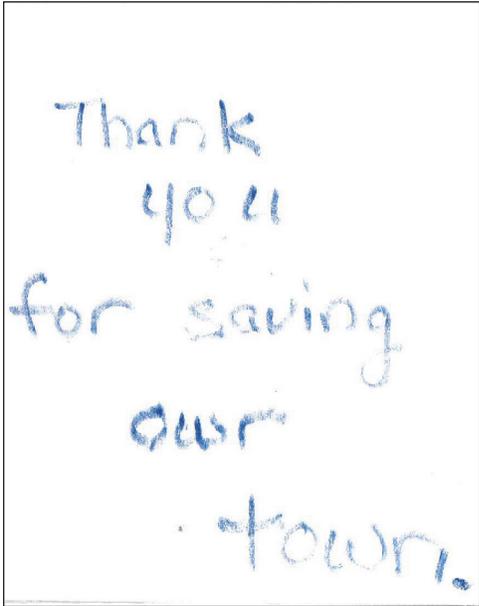
Submitted by  
NANCY BOUDRIE

"I am submitting an article that was published in the X-Windows magazine at LANL in 2000.

This is one story of many.

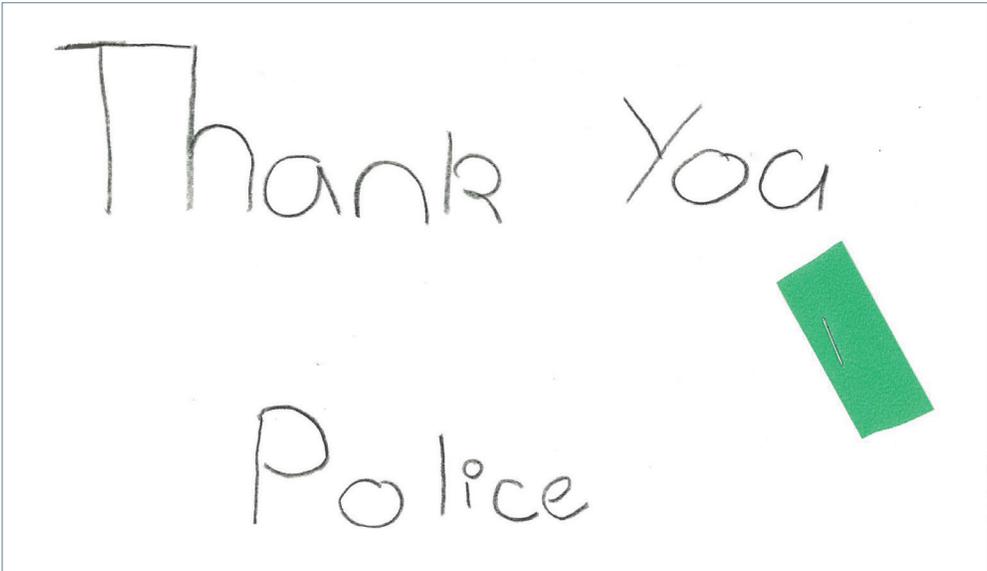
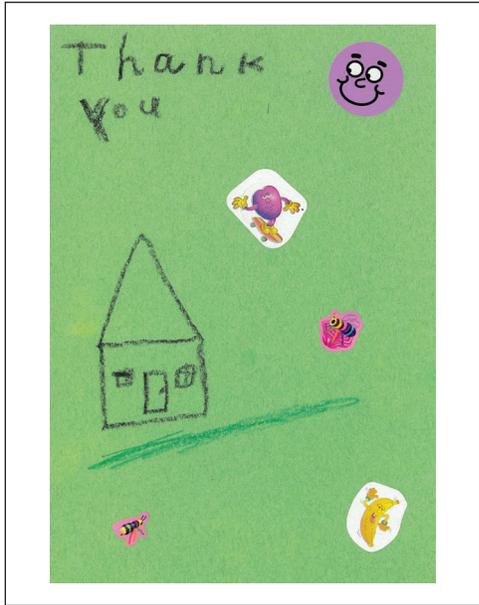
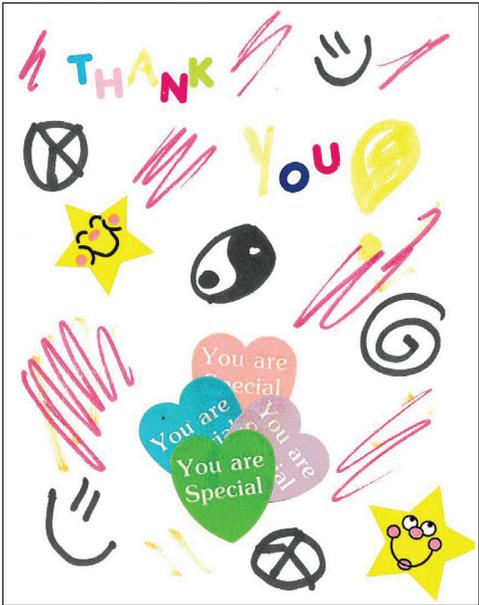
As a reminder to us all that life goes on was a birth of a foal, baby goats, and numerous litters of kittens, whose new homes were horse trailers."

Xwindows | Summer 2000



Thank You cards sent to  
the Los Alamos Police  
Department

From Los Alamos County  
Records



# Firefighters describe the inferno

**FIREFIGHTERS  
DESCRIBE THE  
INFERNO** by Danica  
Tutush

**From LOS ALAMOS  
MONITOR, CERRO  
GRANDE FIRE SPECIAL  
EDITION. June 18,  
2000.**

**By DANICA TUTUSH  
Monitor Assistant Editor**

"I had never seen anything like this before. Never," said Anthony Robles of the Albuquerque Fire Department. Robles was one of 15 firefighters from his crew who had been in Los Alamos battling the Cerro Grande Fire since May 11th.

The Albuquerque crew has been constantly rotating 15 firefighters since then, and on Thursday Robles was returning to Los Alamos to work a second shift. His son Anthony Jr., also a firefighter, is also currently working on the Cerro Grande Fire.

Robles had served his first 48-hour shift starting May 11th, which started in that morning and went through Saturday.

A veteran firefighter with 17 years of experience, Robles said the Cerro Grande has been the most difficult fire he has faced in his career. His wife was worried about him, although he said in this line of work, he is used to facing dangerous situations.

"I was amazed at how quickly it moved and how the winds took this one," Robles said, whose father also had been a firefighter. "It was horrible, just devastating. The worst I have seen."

Robles' shift was divided between locations. First, he was stationed in the Arizona neigh-

borhood and later in Pajarito Canyon. By the time he reached the Arizona neighborhood, "the homes were already burned."

He said that the firefighters tried to protect what structures they could. In the canyon, they faced the wildfire sandwiches between several laboratory technical areas. There, they found themselves fighting hot spots.

"This is the biggest thing we have ever seen."

**- Larry Trujillo**  
Lieutenant  
Albuquerque  
Fire Department

There was at least one local firefighter who lost his own home, said Larry Trujillo, lieutenant for the Albuquerque Firefighters.

"There is a real brotherhood among the firefighters and something like this really hits home hard," Trujillo said, who was beginning a shift on Thursday. When the firefighters go out on the road to help other regions as they had in Los Alamos, they also become displaced from their homes, he explained.

"The feedback from this community has been very positive," Trujillo said, while eating a dinner of spaghetti at the Elks Lodge Thursday. "The residents have gone out of their way to thank us and have been grateful, sometimes with tears in their eyes."

The work schedule of a firefighter requires 48-hour shifts with four days off. In cases like this one, the intensity is even greater, he said. They spend

many hours in the field, often having food or other needs shuttled to them while they are on the line. Fortunately, there were not many injuries and no deaths during this fire, so the EMTs were shuttling food to them.

During his eight years as a firefighter, Trujillo said that he also has seen a lot, but nothing like this fire. Touring the devastated areas, he said that as the father of two young children, he couldn't help but think of the families who had lost their homes. "You look at the saggy swing sets and the toys burned in the rubble and you feel for the kids."

When his crew went in last week, he said, "the fire was all around them."

Then the firefighters faced power problems with the water pressure, "That's the worst thing you can tell a firefighter. That he's got no water," he said.

Wild land firefighters are used to fighting the fires with other means, such as cutting and clearing land, or raking up firebreaks, he explained, but water is crucial when you're dealing with structures that are endangered.

"This is the biggest thing we have ever seen," Trujillo said. You can knock down fires in riverbeds in 48 hours, which the Albuquerque team has done before, but this scenario was totally different, he added. This fire, he noted, the largest in New Mexico's history, will be one that they will all remember for a long time.