



More than 100 local residents attended a fundraiser to help those affected by the Underwood Fruit & Warehouse fire in October.

Difficult Time Brings Community Together

Bingen businesses and residents work together to raise money and gather basic necessities for those in need after a fire at Underwood Fruit & Warehouse put 200 people out of work

By Jeanie Senior

The bad news came while an early morning fire that ravaged the Underwood Fruit & Warehouse facility in Bingen October 18 still was burning: Two hundred people would be out of work, a staggering blow to the local economy.

It was grim. But local businesses and residents stepped forward, and continue to help.

“The fruit packing industry is amazing,” David Bloxom posted on Underwood Fruit’s Facebook page two days after the fire. “Other fruit packing companies in the area are letting us pack pears at their plants. We are using their plants nights and weekends when they aren’t. This will allow us to pack and ship a majority of our inventory. It also puts about 60 of our employees back to work.”

The executive director of Washington

Gorge Action Programs—an agency that helps residents in Skamania and Klickitat counties during difficult times—set up an online GoFundMe site the day of the fire. By early December, 218 people had contributed money, bringing “Underwood Fruit Fire” close to its \$20,000 goal.

Soon after the fire, WGAP head Leslie Narramore recalls, the agency got a look at the scope of the economic impact. In about three weeks, the agency helped 80 families with basic needs, rent, electricity and heat.

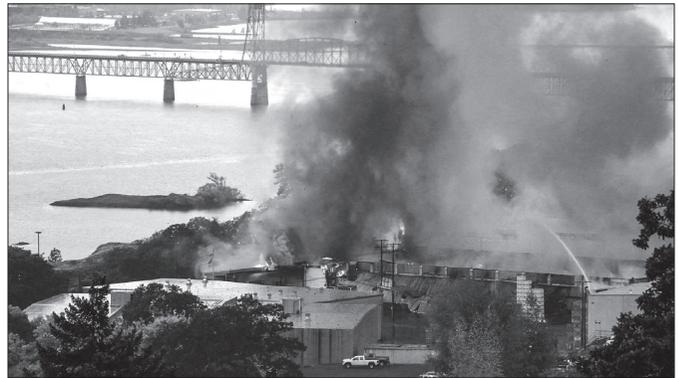
People also responded when WGAP scheduled a fundraiser in November.

The event offered music, food, games for kids, a live auction, a bake sale and pie competition. Volunteers from WGAP, Rotary and the Mount Adams Chamber of Commerce pitched in to help.

Taqueria El Rinconcito Express in Bingen catered the fundraiser and offered



Clockwise from above, Taqueria El Rinconcito Express in Bingen catered the fundraiser. Nine-year-old Hailey Talbert's winning pie sold for \$150—to her father, Tim. The Underwood Fruit & Warehouse fire in October put 200 people out of work. Community members and businesses, with a grant from Washington Gorge Action Programs, have raised more than \$40,000.



a 50 percent discount on its food.

Brad Roberts, who owns the building that houses WGAP, provided the vacant two-story space where the gathering was held rent free.

Leslie saw the community come together to help one another while setting up the fundraiser.

“No one ever told me no,” she said. “It was like, ‘Yes, let’s do this.’”

More than 100 people showed up—an impressive number on a Friday evening when a number of other community events were going on.

The pie contest was a last-minute addition. Competitors were asked to bring two pies: one for judging, the other to be sold.

Pie-bakers brought in a sumptuous display of pastries.

“We should have expected it,” said WGAP board member Laurie Stanton. “People in this town show up.”

The fundraiser brought in more than \$5,000. There was lively bidding for donated items, including a pair of Trailblazers tickets that prompted exciting auction activity. The top four pies, judged by Amiee Blevins of Sweetheart

Bake Shop in The Dalles, and Julie Vance, owner of Sweet Things by Julie, were sold at the auction.

Top bidder for the prizewinning pie baked by Hailey Talbert, 9, was her father, Tim, who paid \$150. Mike Mayfield’s apple pie won the grand prize.

At the fundraiser, Skyline Hospital Foundation President Bob Weisfield announced the foundation board unanimously voted to grant \$25,000 to WGAP to aid victims of the fire.

“Thank you for doing all of this,” Underwood Fruit Superintendent Ed Ing said at the fundraiser. “I am overwhelmed and my heart is so full. This community is amazing.”

Among those he also thanked were members of the 15 Columbia Gorge fire departments, who, Ed said, did everything they could to keep people safe.

The facility will be rebuilt as soon as possible, Ed said.

“We intend to stay,” he said. “This is our home. We’re pretty confident there

will be something in place when the next crop comes on in August.”

Meanwhile, WGAP bought supplies of laundry soap, toilet paper and other basics to have available. Donations of those items, as well as to the food bank, are welcome as the agency deals with the increased demand for assistance.

Going forward, WGAP plans to put on a series of financial literacy classes and provide one-on-one budget counseling, Leslie said. Skyline Hospital urges people with existing medical bills to work with the hospital and get enrolled in a payment plan so their bills don’t go to a debt collection agency.

For now, half of the \$25,000 grant from the Skyline Hospital Foundation is in a separate account to be used for emergency medical needs, Leslie said, with the rest assigned to rent and utilities. ■