

# 'Stubborn' janitor camps out amid rubble of Los Angeles fires

AFP- Among the charred ruins of Pacific Palisades, Jeff Ridgway walks his dog Abby as if nothing has happened. Unlike the tens of thousands of people driven out by the wildfires, this janitor refused to evacuate.

He has been holed up in his home in this upscale Los Angeles neighborhood for a week now, after defending the building with garden hoses and buckets of water.

"It was just a war," the 67-year-old Californian told AFP, pointing to a blackened eucalyptus tree that he prevented from burning, just in front of the apartment building where he lives and works.

"But I was just stubborn. I was like: 'I'm not going to be defeated by you. I'm sorry, this is just not gonna happen.'"

After nearly 35 years living in this complex, Ridgway was determined to save its 18 apartments from the devastating flames.

When the city ran out of water to spray, he resorted to scooping bucketloads from the swimming pool.

"I just felt like I had a certain responsibility, both to my home and my stuff, but to their stuff," he said, referring to the building's tenants.

Several fires continue to burn in Los Angeles, where at least 24 people have perished.

In Pacific Palisades and across town in Altadena, police and military roadblocks have sealed off the worst-hit regions,

even from residents trying to return.

– ‘Smudge’ –

But Ridgway never left, and does not want to end up in a hotel room or a shelter.

So he continues to camp out in his apartment, despite the scenes of desolation outside his windows.

The building’s tenants, who did leave, have sent him bottled water and food deliveries, via a kindly police officer.

The assorted clementines, tomatoes and other supplies are enough to last “at least two weeks.”

He even received fresh socks, and chicken jerky for his dog.

“She’s very happy with her food now. And if she’s happy, then I’m pretty happy,” he said, smiling affectionately at his spaniel.

Without electricity, he has been wearing the same clothes for days.

“I need to get a shower,” admitted Ridgway, his tweed top and jeans caked in soot.

“She needs to get a bath too,” he said, referring to his faithful pooch.

“I’ve started calling her ‘Smudge,’ because she’s gotten so dirty.”

Luckily, Ridgway is no stranger to rudimentary conditions – he recalls with fond nostalgia several rough-and-ready camping trips to the remote Yosemite National Park.

– ‘Shangri-la’ –

Pacific Palisades captured the heart of this former bookseller

many years ago.

For him, these hills overlooking the Pacific Ocean are not just a haunt of celebrity residents like Anthony Hopkins – a former “honorary mayor” of the community.

“It’s a Shangri-la,” said Ridgway.

“It’s also a real community. It’s got a huge history.”

The neighborhood is home to the Getty Villa, an ancient Roman-style mansion with a rich collection of classical antiquities.

Famed designers Charles and Ray Eames also constructed a studio on the hillsides. With its colorful concrete blocks, it has become a landmark of modern mid-century architecture.

So far these gems have survived the flames.

But a stone’s throw from Ridgway’s apartment, a mall with ornate facades that dated to 1924 is nothing more than ruins.

“Ours is probably one of the older buildings in town now,” sighed the janitor, in his 1950s residence.

Every year he looks forward to the July 4th Independence Day celebrations.

Last year, the occasion drew tens of thousands of people to Pacific Palisades, where crowds watched as parachutists descended from the sky and landed on Sunset Boulevard.

Ridgway is convinced his neighborhood will emerge from the fires to become a paradise once more, for the same reasons he originally fell in love with it.

“Each of these lots without a house is still a one or two million dollar lot. It’s definitely going to come back,” he said.

“At the end of the day, we still have the mountains right

there, we have the ocean right there, and mostly we have a blue sky and good air quality. That's what will bring people back."

AFP