# Black heritage at risk amid Calif. wildfires

## Advocates seek plan for long-term revitalization

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USA TODAY

As embers wafted overhead against a reddening sky, Adonis and Denise Jones grabbed a few belongings and left their house in Altadena, California, figuring firefighters battling the wildfire would do their thing and they'd be able to return in a couple of days.

Their home had been purchased in the 1960s by Denise's parents, part of a growing influx of African American homeowners and business owners who found acceptance and affordability in the hillside suburb, making it among Los Angeles County's first Black middle-class havens.

Numerous family members followed and, like others, passed their homes down through generations as California's real estate market flourished.

The wildfire, among a series of large-scale blazes that struck the county this month, has ripped a hole in the foundation they and others left behind. Rochele Jones, the couple's 42-year-old daughter, said her parents and other family members collectively lost more than a dozen homes in Altadena.

"It's gut-wrenching," she said. "You had your family around, and when you had an issue, you could turn to your family for help. But this was the first time I've experienced where everybody lost everything on the same day."

With many of the structures in the community of 43,000 largely destroyed, many question whether Altadena will be able to reclaim the diverse character and Black heritage that made it unique.

A pair of prominent African American law firms have partnered with California's Prince Hall Masons to launch a GoFundMe page dedicated to Black residents displaced by the fire to prioritize those most at risk and fill the financial gaps not met by federal assistance.

"This community has a large population of African Americans," said James Bryant, a partner with The Cochran Firm in Los Angeles. "There's a lot of elderly people who've owned their homes forever and live on fixed incomes. Their insurance policies are getting canceled. If we don't raise the issue, they're going to get overlooked."

Overall, the Southern California fires have killed at least 27 and damaged or destroyed more than 10,000 structures along the Pacific Coast and inland near the San Gabriel Mountains.

Hundreds of displaced Black Altadena families have launched GoFundMe pages seeking financial aid, "but there's also a lot of elderly people out there who don't know how to do that," Bryant said. "They're our most vulnerable folks."

He said that although the short-term goal is to help people get what they need to stay afloat, organizers will look to build long-term partnerships to help revitalize the area and protect those who want to stay from predatory developers.

"Some people have already been reached out to about selling their property, and that really hurts," community advocate Jasmyne Cannick said. "People are waiting in the wings to buy. We want to make sure folks aren't tricked into signing over their land."

Altadena's Black community had begun to sprout in the area as early as the 1920s and 1930s, when the Great Migration brought families looking to escape discrimination in the Jim Crow South.

"Altadena was one of the initial neighborhoods in Los Angeles County that allowed Black families," Bryant said. "That's why you saw so many generational families living in this area."

Until the 1960s, Altadena remained overwhelmingly white, a result of past racial covenants, according to nonprofit advocacy group Altadena Heritage.

The community began to transform with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Fair Housing Act of 1968. White families began to flee the area, driven by freeway construction, smog and societal developments like the civil rights movement, school integration and the Watts Riots, the group said.

By 1980, a population that was 95% white had fallen to 49%. Meanwhile, as Black professionals and working-class families found affordable refuge in Altadena, their numbers rose in the same 20-year period from under 4% to 43%.

"Places like Altadena and certain areas of Compton and South Central Los Angeles was where Black families were forced to live," Bryant said. "Altadena was a little further out, but it was affordable and allowed Black businesses to operate. Black families could raise families and have a community where they felt safe and could support each other."

The suburban community they built was passed down to their children, generational homes that in time grew in value along with California's real estate market. Today, the unincorporated area remains one of Southern California's most diverse, with a Black population just over 20% and a remarkable homeownership rate of more than 75%.

"It was a happy place with beautiful mountains," said Carl Jones, 55, a 25-year veteran of the Pasadena parks department. "We worked hard to pay for it. It was a Black community. It wasn't skid row, but we weren't rich."

The home in which he lived with his mother, jazz vocalist Cheryl Conley, was destroyed by the fire. Conley is staying with a friend in Los Angeles; Jones is currently at a local hotel but doesn't know what he'll do after that.

In the late 1990s, Conley bought the home in which she and Jones lived for a fraction of what homes are going for today. But the real value, Jones said, was in the sense of community.

"It was the neighbors," he said. "We were so tight. We looked after each other." That sense of community and heritage, Jones said, "is unrecoverable. You can only get that with time. If we go, it's over. It won't happen again."

In recent years, many insurance companies have discontinued fire coverage in Altadena. So far, Carl Jones said he'd gotten no response from his insurance carrier, but he knows recovery can't happen without help from outside.

"We've already gotten calls to sell," he said. "But we're going to stay. If I have to live in a tent on the property, we're going to stay. It's ours."