March 12, 2020

Dear Friend of Corazón Healdsburg,

On Wednesday, October 23, 2019, the Warner and Hall families, who had homes on shared property on Pine Flat Road, were forced to flee as a wildfire had sparked nearby, just miles from Healdsburg’s Plaza. Three generations of the Warner family had lost their keepsakes, clothing, and the historic homestead that had been in the Warner family for over 100 years. Without homeowner’s insurance and no government declaration of federal emergency, the family was unsure of where to turn for shelter and basic necessities.

It was not long before these families and countless others realized that you, the donors who contributed to Corazón Healdsburg’s Unity and Community Fund, were there for them. The fund, established only two days after the fire began, provided the resources necessary to pay for hotel rooms and re-open Corazón’s Healdsburg Free Store where, a little more than two weeks later the Hall family was able to replace essentials like clothing, shoes, toiletries, jackets, socks, and underwear. The matriarch of the Warner family wanted you to know, “With the help of Corazón we got into a hotel right after we lost our home and they helped us navigate through this disaster. Corazón took care of us—myself and my disabled husband, my daughters, my grandchildren and our two dogs—and they still are.”

The Warner and Hall families were two of thousands in our community significantly affected by what became known as the Kincade Fire; a fire that forced the largest mandatory evacuation in Sonoma County. By the time the fire was contained on November 6, 2019, it was on record as the largest fire of the 2019 California wildfire season, and also the largest wildfire ever to occur in Sonoma County. The mass evacuation disproportionately affected thousands of vulnerable individuals and families; in particular, families who work in Healdsburg’s two largest industries (hospitality and agriculture) and depend on their daily labor to feed and shelter themselves and their children.

Natural disasters like the Kincade Fire and the 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires, underscore the significant progress Corazón Healdsburg has made since its founding, as well as the work that is yet to be done. Corazón galvanized the community by creating the Unity & Community Fund to meet the needs of the survivors. Your response, and that of more than 1,000 other donors, was an overwhelming wave of financial support which we immediately put to use, with funding for direct relief, rental and housing assistance, and navigation throughout the immediate aftermath, repopulation, and beyond.

We are deeply thankful for your support in helping provide vital resources during our community’s difficult recovery.

Sincerely,

Ariel Kelley
Chief Executive Officer | Corazón Healdsburg

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Corazón Healdsburg’s team sprung into action as the fire spread; integrating our own Casa del Corazón headquarters with the Red Cross shelter set up on site and activating our partners across the region to source staff for seven more Red Cross shelters. Corazón found hotel rooms for families throughout the Bay Area, in Santa Rosa, Petaluma, San Rafael, Oakland, Pleasanton, Foster City and San Francisco. In these cities, where the air was clean and power and water was available, our northern Sonoma County families waited for the fire to be contained and the mandatory evacuation order to be lifted. When families were allowed to return to the community, Casa del Corazón headquarters were converted from a shelter back into a resource center. Working side by side with Sonoma County’s Local Assistance Center for fire relief, in our community center location, we once again became the hub where residents came for support during the crisis.

With the trauma and experience of the 2017 Sonoma Complex fires still fresh in our collective memory, Corazón donors and staff were quick to respond. Calls flooded in from companies and individuals across the country who wanted to donate goods to those in need. As a result, we were able to re-open the Free Store within two weeks of repopulation, at a space generously donated to Corazón Healdsburg, on the former site of DiVine Pizza. Corazón Healdsburg’s Free Store served 2,771 households over 66 days in operation.

During this time, we continued to provide housing assistance, pet care for animals burned in the fire, tools to help people get back to work, clothes, and financial assistance to cover expenses such as utility bills, rent, and medical care. Corazón also partnered with the Redwood Empire Food Bank and World Central Kitchen to distribute over 47,000 meals valued at over $150,000 to 5,648 of our local residents. And while many other agencies were distributing gift cards for national chain stores such as Target and Walmart, we wanted your donated funds to also support local businesses that had suffered losses during the fire. By providing gift cards to neighborhood vendors like Lola’s Market, Big John’s Market, Jerry’s Valero gas station, as well as Visa gift cards that could be used at any local retailer, we were able to amplify your impact. Your response helped both residents and businesses recover.

On November 24, 2019 we were proud to present our signature Día de los Muertos event. Due to the Kincade Fire, it was sadly postponed from its original date of October 27, 2019. However, after the fire was contained, our team of incredible volunteers worked to reschedule vendors and performers and brought together a much needed celebration and created an opportunity for healing, on a scale never seen before in our community. With over 3,500 members of our diverse Healdsburg community in attendance, the Día de los Muertos celebration showed just how strong we can be when we come together as one family.

On January 19, 2020, 88 days after the fire broke out, the 2019 Healdsburg Free Store closed its doors. During the same week, our last displaced client, checked out of the hotel we’d arranged for him and returned to his property, where a new trailer, and the overwhelming task of rebuilding his life after the fire awaited. These events marked the end of Phase One of our Kincade Fire recovery efforts which focused on basic needs and laid the groundwork for Corazón’s longer, but more impactful and difficult next phase.

Phase Two of Corazón’s Kincade Fire recovery response involves driving systems change to target the root cause that is limiting our community’s ability to build resiliency: a cycle of poverty.

We are even more motivated now to realize our mission to bridge the racial and economic divide in Northern Sonoma County. Our client base now totals 5,500; over five times the number of individuals we were serving before the Sonoma Complex and Kincade Fires.

Your contributions to the Unity & Community Fund have provided much needed resources to our community as well as support that will enable us to evaluate the capacity of our existing communications and logistics infrastructure, identify strengths and weaknesses, and implement improved protocol and technology to ensure stronger staff and organizational preparedness when we face our next emergency. In March we will be launching a series of emergency preparedness and financial first aid workshops to build resilience in the community over the long term.

We are continuing to provide our Kinder-2College college savings program and FirstGen College Counseling Program to hundreds of exceptional youth in our community. We are poised and ready to deliver our programming in English as a Second Language, GED preparation, financial literacy, adult education, and emergency preparedness. And we are expanding our early childhood programming to ensure a safe and nurturing place to learn, allowing parents to focus on increasing the quality of life for their entire family.

With your support, our Northern Sonoma County community is moving towards recovery, showing more than ever that WE ARE STRONGER AS ONE FAMILY.

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Corazón Healdsburg is deeply grateful for the outpouring of community support in wake of the 2019 Kincade Fire. We owe an infinite debt of gratitude to the following donors to our Unity & Community Fund. With your support, we have been able to assist thousands of individuals as of December 31, 2019.

Every effort was made to provide accurate donor information; if you notice anything in error, please email olympia@corazonhealdsburg.org.