

**Rebuild: Up from the Ashes**  
**Stories of Hope: Bill VanTassell**  
*By Rick and Katie Larson*

It's Bill VanTassell's third winter living in a small, fifth-wheel trailer that shows fire scorching on the outside from the Okanogan fire disaster. With the trailer's partially melted insulation and the below-zero temperature on this early January morning, he needs to stay well bundled up inside.

He was asleep when a friend called him and told him fire was coming up the remote valley near Brewster where the 55-year-old lives on property shared with his mother and step-father, who were traveling at the time. He saw a "firestorm" coming, grabbed a few things and his dogs, and fled.

Bill spent the night in his car in a gas station parking lot watching the fierce glow as the fire burned up to the edge of town. In the morning, he drove for miles up the canyon in choking smoke as the fire smoldered all around.

When he arrived, he couldn't see his manufactured home on the back part of the 20-acre property because of heavy smoke. He could see his parents' home was still standing — but the awning over the attached deck was on fire. He and a friend grabbed buckets and scooped water from a koi pond to put the fire out.

Days later, Bill found his home had been destroyed, along with his parents' garage and barn. Their fifth-wheel had survived, but was charred.

For Bill, whose own home was uninsured because of the remote location, it was one more in a long string of bad luck that dates back to severe injuries he sustained in Western Washington wrecks in 1998 and 2002 when courier vans he was driving were struck head-on by drunk drivers.

The accidents left him in constant pain and debilitated, so he moved to Eastern Washington to join his parents. He found work and began the slow process of recovering.

Then the fire wiped him out. He admits feeling overwhelmed at times, but not ready to give up. "At times you don't understand it," he said. "But you just do."

That meant moving into the damaged fifth-wheel — until Okanogan Long-Term Recovery Group offered to build a home for him. The foundation for the small two-bedroom home is in place, and walls are being pre-assembled in Western Washington by volunteers before being trucked to his site.

Thanks to such donations of money, labor and materials by a variety of charity and faith-based groups that are coordinated by OLTRG, Bill hopes to be in his new home this year. As he stands next to the foundation wearing a hat that says "Pateros Strong — Rising from the Ashes," he can see his recovery becoming reality.