AZPM's Andrea Kelly Opted for Helping Over Honeymooning

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The Monday after their wedding, Andrea Kelly and Michel Marizco spent the morning making sure their guests were safe.

Kelly, assistant news director at Arizona Public Media, and Marizco, a senior editor at KJZZ, the National Public Radio station in Phoenix, became husband and wife on Oct. 7 during a ceremony held on the northern California coast. Wildfires began tearing through the region late the following evening at the start of what became a natural disaster that destroyed at least 245,000 acres and killed 43 people.

The couple had planned to leave that Monday for their honeymoon trip: camping beneath the redwoods. Instead, they ended up coordinating the evacuations of their family and friends, and volunteering at a rural shelter.

Just hours before they planned to head toward their campsite north of Santa Rosa, Marizco's hometown, his family called to say they'd been evacuated. The couple immediately began calling other family members and friends to find out who was safe, and who needed to stay with them at their hotel on the coast, which wasn't at risk.

"We just did what needed to be done right away," Kelly said. "That was finding out if everybody was safe, and then after that, finding out if people needed a place to go."

Kelly and Marizco drove into Santa Rosa on Tuesday to take stock of the damage. The drive, covering dozens of smoke-filled miles, was "eerie," she said.

The wildfires had spread beyond woodlands and threatened large swaths of the city.

"We all picture wildfires in the forests," Kelly added. "The equivalent of what we saw in Santa Rosa was like Sam Hughes burning down. It was midtown neighborhoods that were just destroyed and gone."

None of Marizco's immediate family members lost their homes, though many had been repeatedly evacuated and allowed to return to their homes over several days as officials struggled to predict the fires' paths.

With their own loved ones accounted for, the couple were eager to help. Assisting via their roles as journalists wasn't an option since the two were far from home.

"It was really strange to be in the middle of a disaster and not doing the thing we would normally be doing, which is covering it and helping people get the information they need," Kelly said. "So, we just felt compelled to do something since we couldn't do what our first
instinct was."

The pair drove to a Red Cross shelter in Santa Rosa and offered their help. With shelter volunteers in high demand, Red Cross staff sent the couple about 80 miles north to the rural town of Willits.

After some brief training, Kelly and Marizco found themselves running a shelter in a high school gymnasium with two other volunteers. The accommodations were scarce — volunteers had no food, hot water, gas or phone service to offer evacuees. Still, the four volunteers pulled an all-night shift from 7 p.m. on Oct. 10 to 7 a.m. the following day, getting people registered and helping them find beds and blankets.

"Since there were four of us, somebody could get a little nap while the others stayed up, but nobody got any sleep," Kelly said.

Kelly and Marizco returned to Santa Rosa the next morning when their shift ended to check once more on Marizco's family. None of them lost their homes, but they knew dozens who did, Kelly said. With the worst of it over, Kelly and Marizco decided to cut the trip short and return to Tucson that Wednesday.

"Aside from working the shelter, there just wasn't much for us to help with at that point, and we felt like we were potentially more a drain on resources," Kelly added.

Vanessa Barchfield [3], a reporter and producer for AZPM, attended Kelly's wedding. After flying home late the following night, Barchfield didn't hear about the fires until Monday morning, when she saw on Facebook that Kelly and Marizco were safe. News of their decision to volunteer at a shelter reached Barchfield the next day.

"I was actually entirely unsurprised," Barchfield said about the couple's plans to ditch their honeymoon. "I'm not surprised that either of them were willing to sacrifice their honeymoon and throw themselves into helping people. That sums up who both of them are."

Kelly said she has no regrets about her missed honeymoon, adding that she and Marizco did what they needed to in the moment.

"We can always come back and camp."

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