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EXCLUSIVE

## North Forney alum starts over after deadly San Marcos fire

Sawyer Click, Special Contributor Aug 12, 2018

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Iconic Village Apartments fire survivor Branson Fairbrother in his new donation-littered room.

Sawyer Click

**SAN MARCOS, TEXAS** — In the weeks following the deadly San Marcos apartment fire that left more than 200 displaced, North Forney High School alumnus and fire survivor Branson Fairbrother's old apartment remains in rubble while his new home is littered with donations.

The fire, which killed five people and left six hospitalized, burst out around 4:30 a.m. July 20 and was fought by over four nearby fire departments for nearly 12 hours. After it was reduced to smolder, one building was entirely engulfed and three others faced damage. In the end, Branson and others residing in Building 500, where it started, were told they were unable to gather their remnants.

For Branson, a guitarist, avid songwriter and a Texas State University senior, the rubble harbored everything he owned, including sentiments unrecoverable through donations: an old phone riddled with amateur recordings of some of his first songs, a new Vox amp he received as a birthday gift from his parents, his childhood rock collection, his songbooks, and more.

"I knew it was serious, but I didn't know the whole gravity of what I lost," Branson said. "The loss and the rebuilding that I'm facing... It's hard to face the truth of it."

The night of the fire, Branson was at his girlfriend's house, leaving his friend, Mike [didn't want to give last name], sleeping in his bed, and his roommate Matthew Smith, in the room across the hall. That morning, Mike and Matthew woke up to a variety of screams and a smell of smoke. As they opened the apartment door, they saw the blaze, grabbed just their phones, and instantly left, leaving behind everything Matthew and Branson owned.

Mike and Matthew reconvened behind Matthew's car in the parking lot and called Branson to warn him of the fire. Immediately following, Branson called his mother, Regina Fairbrother and went to meet Mike and Matthew in the parking lot of the blazing building as firefighters fought the flames.

"The first five hours felt like 30 minutes," Branson said. "I thought I was in a dream. It spread so quick and I kept seeing fire come out of rooms. We were all in tears as we watched it burn down. No one really said a word."

As Branson and his friends watched the blaze, his mother and father dropped what they were doing to head down to San Marcos to make sure Branson was okay. As soon as they made it, Regina insisted on taking pictures with her son to make sure everyone on Facebook knew he was okay. Though they were smiling, Regina said the mental and emotional toll the fire had taken on Branson was obvious.

"His room was scattered with his personality," Regina said. "From his rock collection to all his guitars, he was everywhere. The fact that he couldn't get anything and that he just lost it all... Rebuilding will take a while, but I know he will be okay. He's been so focused on make sure everyone else is okay that he hasn't really taken a minute for himself. It's good karma, and karma always comes back."

As the adrenaline settled, Branson, alongside Mike, Matthew and bandmates from his psychedelic indie band Wezmer, gathered the keys to their new house across the street and set up a donation station for all those who lost belongings in the fire. In just a few hours, it became a spot of recovery and hope for those who found themselves with ashes where their bed used to be.

Adrian Perez, guitarist and vocalist for Wezmer, aided Branson in setting up the clothes-strewn sidewalk donation center and has also been planning benefit concerts for the fire victims. Days after the initial donation boost, community members still stop by to hand off clothes, furniture, food, toiletries and more.

"It was so nice of Branson to set up this spot for donations," Perez said. "It's cool that he can still do this when he lost most everything."

With a house scattered with donations, Branson said he had a lot to be thankful for and he knew that others were still struggling.

"I just wanted to make sure everyone had what they needed," Branson said. "I was lucky because I already had my keys here, so I wasn't worried about having a roof over my head. I was worried about other people having enough clothes or shoes or anything else they might need."

In an effort to ease Branson's losses, Branson's brother K.J. Fairbrother created a *crowdsourced relief fund* to help his brother afford back some of his lost music equipment. According to Regina, music always played an important role in K.J. and Branson's lives. At family gatherings, the duo would play and sing to entertain everybody. So far, the relief fund has raised over \$750 for Branson in 22 days. In the meantime, Branson has been able to continue making music with Wezmer by friends lending him equipment.

With his head above water, Branson said he's looking forward to the future: "I'm not trying to forget, I'm trying to move on."

As if the homemade donation center wasn't enough, Branson and Wezmer will help host the benefit concerts all through August to aid the displaced residents' recovery process. Those who can attend are encouraged to make donations. Those who can't attend can still make donations through Texas State's relief fund or by donating clothes, toiletries and other items to the Blanco River Regional Recovery Team with the word "Iconic" written on a note with the donation.

*Editors Note: Sawyer Click is a Terrell High School graduate and is currently a senior journalist at Texas State University in San Marcos where he serves as News Editor of The University Star newspaper.*