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Sarah Ettman-Sterner: Santa Barbara's 'Burn Notice'

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By Sarah Ettman-Sterner, Green Hawk Interactive Producer

Real-life drama about fire, family and fighting floods unfolds for local residents

I have an admission to make. I don't watch much television, but when I do, I fancy the hit [USA Network](#) series [Burn Notice](#).

Why? A) It's shot in Miami, where I was born; a town that's a feast for the eye. There are exterior shots of lush, green tropical foliage (no drought conditions there), familiar beaches, skin, skin, skin and plenty of water, fresh and salt; and b) it features the escapades of sexy lead character [Michael Westen](#), a blacklisted spy.

He's on a quest to find out who "outed" him from his secret agency and issued the order (burn notice) to terminate him. The poor guy's existence is obliterated from the face of the Earth. He has no credit cards (horrors!), no job, no earthly possessions, no identity, not even a library card to his name. He's a good guy battling slick, macho evil-doers, continually surviving a multitude of threats to his life.



Sarah Ettman-Sterner
(Nick Sterner photo)

Burn Notice is a nonstop adrenaline rush of danger, punctuated by hard-core explosions involving homemade, cleverly designed incendiary devices. There are massive amounts of fire that burn everything around the main man. It's scripted, choreographed and controlled fantasy neatly packaged in a one-hour episode.

Hmmm ... drama, great visuals, battle against good and evil, fiery mayhem — sounds familiar. Entertaining, but not real. If you want reality drama, go outside and look up and all around you. Mother Nature has issued one hell of a “burn notice” to the Golden State, and especially in Santa Barbara’s own backyard. It’s a raw, savage, emotional roller-coaster of a true-life production, set in the convergence zone of urban neighborhoods and national forest wild lands.

The aftermath of the past 18 months, the mother of all fire seasons, continues to unfold with a rich array of characters — real people who make TV’s *Westen* look like a wimp.

There are the hardy survivors, such as the Keltners — Nancy the matriarch, daughter Karen and son Mike, who live high atop Santa Barbara’s Tunnel Road. The family is living a rugged lifestyle as they pick up the pieces of their lives after the shattering blow of the Jesusita Fire’s burn notice.



They’ve created a temporary camping compound out of used RVs. While the Keltner homestead features spectacular ocean views, and hope springs eternal for rebuilding their house and guest cottage, for now they’re surrounded by a crusty moonscape of denuded hills. The noise from heavy construction

equipment on adjacent properties never ends. The wind howls, sending up vortexes of choking dust and ash. Few really know what it's like to suffer the shocking loss of a home, possessions and quality of life. And that's only the beginning.

The Keltners are facing down a multitude of obstacles created by May's devastating fire with aplomb and true grit — lots of grit. They are battling it out with the “bad guys”: an insurance provider that is elusive, unresponsive and has yet to make good on the loss. They've chased off unscrupulous construction people who trespass on their property, as well as looky-loos and hikers who ignore the trail and road closure signs, invading their privacy and stomping on fragile soil.

From sunrise to sunset, the family endures a barrage of aerial attacks from the low-flying fleet of hydromulching aircraft — think [World War II](#) air raids by the [Luftwaffe](#). Only in this case, the payload isn't bombs; it's organic hydromulch (made of guar, wood, paper and water). The pilots are not just good, they are great at what they do, working with pinpoint accuracy. Flying sorties every 15 minutes — after short pit stops to fill up mulch tanks — for 12 hours a day is a dangerous job. Pilots fly low to the ground to drop their loads in steep canyons and must pull up fast to avoid power lines, trees and in-your-face mountains.



Santa Barbara's *Burn Notice* drama includes real-life people, including Nancy Keltner, center, and children Karen and Mike. The family lost their home in the Jesusita Fire. (Keltner family photo)

“It's amazing to have them flying so close we can see the pilots' faces,” Nancy Keltner said. “We realize that this process is important to stabilize the ground around us, to prevent erosion and the potential for floods as we enter the rainy season. The mulch is helping nature along, speeding the regrowth of native vegetation.”

In Santa Barbara's version of *Burn Notice*, there are also guardian angels fulfilling roles so genuine and heartfelt that it restores faith in humanity.

Manning the first line of defense after the Jesusita Fire and any other local disaster are the [American Red Cross](#) staff members and volunteers who continue to work to ease the burden faced by fire victims. There are the [Alpha Thrift Stores](#), the [Unity Shoppe](#) and the [Tzu Chi Foundation](#), a Buddhist compassion relief organization that provided financial support in the days immediately after the fire.

[California Southern Baptist Convention Disaster Relief](#) members helped some of the underinsured and uninsured fire victims with demolition and debris removal free of charge. An organization called [CARE, Community Assisting Recovery](#) is a group of disaster survivors who volunteer to mentor new victims in the

process of rebuilding their lives. Their mission is “to provide free, comprehensive information about disaster recovery, including the insurance claim process, to disaster victims so they may effectively re-establish their homes, lives and communities.” Talk about watching your back. The CARE team helps protect people from “unscrupulous business people, contractors, repairers or others intending to make a quick profit off the disaster.”



The aerial hydromulching operation included the burn area just above Lauro Reservoir in lower San Roque Canyon. The pilots navigated low-lying hazards such as trees, power lines and hillsides. (Sarah Ettman-Sterner / Noozhawk photo)

The players in this production wouldn't be complete without hardworking unsung heroes. Few realize that while brave firefighters are visible on the frontlines battling fire, the [Santa Barbara County Flood Control and Water Conservation District](#) works diligently behind the scenes. It wages war on what fire leaves behind — scorched ground that increases the potential for excessive runoff, floods and mudslides.

Directed by Tom Fayram, an upbeat, professional, no-nonsense personality, the group literally works down in the trenches. Their job is to clear out creek beds, basins, culverts and reservoirs clogged with the charred debris. They also work to coordinate the hydromulching operations on the ground at the [Santa Barbara Airport](#) and in the sky. Workers toil in the sun and in steep, hostile terrain. Their long, rigorous days are filled with sweat, soot and plenty of poison oak. Their task is as unglamorous as it gets, but critical to mitigating the potential for a crisis brought on by winter El Niño rains that are on their way.

The unrehearsed outdoor drama unfolding before our eyes on land and in the sky just may be better than any TV (or Web) show out there. And what an ensemble — fire survivalists, gadget-toting engineers, heavy-equipment operators, insurance scammers, thoughtful Buddhists and hotshot pilots carpeting the ground with bright-green gunk. No Hollywood scriptwriter could think up this stuff!

Sorry, Westen. Right now, I'm just not that into you.

[Click here](#) to watch Green Hawk's exclusive new video, *Santa Barbara's Burn Notice*, produced in association with [Blue Ocean Productions](#).

— [Green Hawk](#) interactive producer Sarah Ettman-Sterner focuses on current environmental trends and marine-related topics. A member of the [Society for Environmental Journalists](#), she provided the “voice” for [Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Futures Society](#) for more than a decade. She can be reached at sesterner@noozhawk.com.

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