

■ FOR SUBSCRIBERS LOCAL

Kentucky native Charlie Owen's Lahaina Bakery destroyed in Maui wildfire



Kate Marijlovic

Louisville Courier Journal

Published 7:02 a.m. ET Aug. 13, 2023 | Updated 8:35 a.m. ET Aug. 13, 2023

Kentucky native Charlie Owen's business, town, home and almost all of his possessions burned to the ground in Lahaina wildfire last week.

Still, he said he's more fortunate than most.

Owen and his family are safe. They have relatives to stay with and support them as they rebuild their lives.

But for many families that isn't an option, after the small town on Maui's western coast, was destroyed by unprecedented wildfires last week.

Now the deadliest natural disaster in Hawaiian history, more than 80 people have died. Efforts to contain multiple fires on Maui are ongoing, but as of Friday afternoon, the Lahaina fire was 85 percent contained.

Owen, a chef, first moved to Hawaii 25 years ago where he met his wife Jen. The pair would move back to Louisville, where they lived before returning to Hawaii 10 years ago, moving to Lahaina.

The couple purchased Bakery Lahaina – which was started in 1979 – from its original owners three years ago.

Charlie Owen said the bakery was leveled, burnt down to the metal scrap of the building. He said there's a "glimmer of a chance" it could come back, but would have to be relocated.

"Bakery Lahaina could be back, but it will not be rebuilt," he said.

More than 2,207 structures have been damaged or destroyed by the Lahaina fire, according to the Pacific Disaster Center and Federal Emergency Management Agency. Before the fire, there was an estimated 4,191 housing units in Lahaina. PDC and FEMA said 86 percent of buildings exposed to the fire were residential.

Owen's sisters are managing a GoFundMe to raise money for the bakery's nine staff members, after the fire destroyed everything they own. So far, they've raised over \$12,000 of their \$35,000 fundraising goal.

The fundraising, Owen said, is going "unbelievably well."

"Our team is highly skilled and passionate, but bakery work is hourly wage employment and most of them have no savings," a paragraph on the GoFundMe reads. "Many have been left without the fundamental necessities for life, including, but not limited to food, water, and shelter."

Related: Death toll is climbing: How to help victims in the Maui wildfires in Hawaii

Owen said it took almost two days to contact all of the bakery's employees, but he has heard from all of them. One employee and a family member fled into the ocean to escape the fire. Another employee and his wife escaped on foot, with only the clothes on their backs. Three lost their homes.

"Everyone lost something," Owen said.

Donations will be distributed between bakery employees and their families. The surplus will be used to help feed the Lahaina community.

Owen said it's common for multiple families on the island to live in one home. Most people work multiple jobs to make ends meet in the tourism-driven economy. Now, those jobs are gone, destroyed along with the buildings that housed them.

"Really the GoFundMe is set up to take care of our employees, who are in the situation I just described," Owen said.

Many of Lahaina's historic buildings, some that date to the 19th century, have burned. The town's 150-year-old banyan tree, one of the largest in the world, was scorched, but remains standing.

"We all fear how the town will change after this," Owen said. "I have no doubt that the charm will most likely be forever lost, and the bigger part is, there will be people and families who have to leave after generations."

Damage from the fire will likely exacerbate Hawaii's housing crisis, driving prices up and forcing Native Hawaiian families to leave. Housing prices have sharply risen in the past two decades, forcing many families to relocate to the mainland. Now, more Native Hawaiians live in the continental United States than in Hawaii.

Owen said it's too soon for his family to decide if they'll stay. He doesn't want to contribute to the housing competitiveness driving Native Hawaiians out of the community.

"Without Hawaiians, how can Lahaina be the same?" Owen said.

Reach reporter Kate Marijolic at kmarijolic@gannett.com or on Twitter @kmarijolic.