

Resilience in the Face of Disaster

On the evening of June 26, 2021, Neighborhood Industries officials were made aware of a fire at their warehouse in southwest Fresno. “I was actually driving home from the grocery store when I saw the smoke,” said Anthony Armour, CEO of Neighborhood Industries. “I called my wife, and I said, ‘I have this really weird feeling that it’s my warehouse. I have to go over there.’ So I drove to our warehouse, with all of our groceries still in the back of my car, and I could see that it was ours.”

Armour says it was impossible to watch destruction at such a large scale and not feel some kind of devastation. “So much of our business ran through that warehouse,” he said. “But more than anything, my concern was for the people who worked there, who would be feeling concerned about the security of those jobs now that the warehouse was gone. As soon as we were certain no one had been inside the building, no one was injured, my next thought became, ‘How do we survive this?’ ”

In a matter of hours, the 30,000 square-foot warehouse had completely burned to the ground, along with an estimated \$300,000-worth of inventory, equipment, and trucks. The facility was used as a distribution center for Neighborhood Industries’ retail and wholesale operations, and also operated as an employment and job training center for employees within the organization’s workforce development program. For each day this portion of the business was non-operational, Neighborhood Industries would be losing about \$2,500. Tallying up the financial losses to their business, and the cost of equipment and warehouse space, Neighborhood Industries officials determined that they would need around \$100,000 to get their warehouse operations going again.

At this point, it was almost like *deja vu*. Nearly a year and a half ago, Neighborhood Industries had faced another threat to their survival, when all of their business enterprises had been deemed “nonessential” and shut down as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The company proved its ability to quickly adapt to a crisis, pivoting operations to address an increasing need exacerbated by the pandemic: food distribution. Working with local community leaders, Neighborhood Industries developed a food distribution program to address the food insecurity many people were experiencing as a result of job losses, closed schools, and sheltering in place. In their successful and quick implementation of this new program, Neighborhood Industries also protected the jobs of their existing employees, and even grew the business to the point of being able to hire new employees to meet the demand.

“We had survived everything the past year threw at us, and in some ways, had actually come out of 2020 as a stronger company,” Armour said. “I have a deep sense of trust in all the people I work with, and their ability to do what they have to in order to survive. My first priority at the beginning of the pandemic was to provide stability for those people by protecting their jobs. In the aftermath of the fire, that became my priority again.”

They immediately started working on a plan of action to get a warehouse up and running. What they hadn't counted on was the scope of support they'd be getting from their community.

"Almost immediately, as soon as the news broke, my phone, my email, and all of our social media channels were flooded with words of love and encouragement," Armour says.

The day after the fire, local bar and restaurant Quail State committed to donating 10% of that night's sales to Neighborhood Industries' recovery efforts. "When we learned that Neighborhood Industries lost their warehouse in the fire, I knew that we needed to do something," said Josh Islas, co-owner of Quail State. "My wife and I decided to dedicate Sunday night to Neighborhood Industries, donating 10% of all of our sales to the organization." Armour says this generosity came as a complete surprise. "We hadn't even reached out to them," Armour says. "They just went for it on their own. It was amazing."

They weren't the only ones to jump into action either. Armour says that in the following days, many local businesses, artists, and individuals reached out, asking what they could do to help, wanting to donate their time, skills, and money to help Neighborhood Industries. Even people within their professional network reached out, offering advice on navigating this difficult situation. "In times of crisis, my gut instinct is always to kick into survival mode," says Armour. "And then to see all these people reaching out, without me even having to say anything, it felt like a weight off my shoulders. In a similar way to what happened during the pandemic for us, it gave me confidence that we could weather this storm."

The community came together for a fundraiser on Wednesday, June 30, 2021 at local craft beer bar, Fresbrew. Nick Jones, owner of Fresbrew, volunteered to host the fundraiser as a sign of solidarity, offering to donate \$1.00 from every drink purchased and all tips collected during the event. "Being a tower business owner, I've had the opportunity to get to know the crew at Neighborhood Industries, and really admire the work they do for the community," Jones said. "Helping them recover from the fire is the least I could do."

As part of the event, Neighborhood Industries CEO Anthony Armour, Development Director Ricky Bravo, and Operations Director Stephen Love took over serving drinks for the night, while attendees were given the chance to mingle and sample locally crafted beers. Guests brought financial donations, as well as donations of used goods to support the thrift store and vintage boutique operations where so much of the workforce training takes place. After such a rough few days, there was an air of excitement as the event kicked off. A high point in the evening came when Courtney Shapiro, Director of Community Relations and Marketing for CalViva Health, stepped forward to present Neighborhood Industries with a check for \$20,000.

"Supporting local community benefit organizations and their program services is a promise we make every year to help strengthen the communities we serve," Shapiro said. "We were saddened to hear about the tragic effects the fire had on Neighborhood Industries day-to-day operations. Our organization understands that good health doesn't just happen in a doctors



office, it comes from partners like Neighborhood Industries. Their goals of educating, employing, and empowering matches perfectly with ours. Which is why we wanted to stop by this event to support them with a \$20,000 tip to help recover and rebuild.”

In the nearly two weeks since the fire, Neighborhood Industries has begun making moves to find a new warehouse space. They had been leasing the previous building, and have been able to move into a temporary warehouse rented from Bitwise Industries for the time being. Fundraising will be a longer process, but Armour says he feels hopeful. “It’s insane to think that it’s only been two weeks since the fire, because it feels like so much has happened for us since then,” he said. “Seeing the resilience of my team, the support we’ve garnered from our community and our network, I have only hope for the future. As crazy as it seems to say, I feel confident that we’ll be able to make it through this challenge even stronger than we were before.”