

Confessions of  
a paid ghoul  
2/4/00  
By Neal Ross

Part of my job is to watch and tell about the destruction of people's lives. It doesn't say that on my resumé, or in the *Index-Tribune* employee packet I filled out two years ago.

But that's the truth – I get paid for, among other things, chasing firefighters and fire engines so I can tell you what they do.

It's one of those things that fills me with mixed emotions. On the one hand, it's tremendously exciting to have a front row seat to a major event; a legally-entitled ticket to adventure in the form of a press card. And there is nothing – and I mean nothing – like seeing firefighters do what they're best at: battling the elements and bringing order to chaos.

On the other hand, people die. Or they're injured. Or they're not – but large chunks of them are gone forever.

That was the situation Tuesday night at the Sonoma Marketplace. Merchants watched as their livelihoods and social identities roared up in a cloud of sparky smoke.

Some wept. Others gaped numbly. One or two worried aloud about what their employees would do without jobs; how they would feed themselves or their families.

Of course, merchants and firefighters weren't the only ones watching the blaze. Curious neighbors gathered amid the billowing smoke and flashing lights, perching on sidewalks and ambulance-tailgates until chased to safety by police.

I couldn't blame them, of course. As far as I can tell, the only thing separating me from the other onlookers – aside from a thick ribbon of "CAUTION" tape – was California Penal Code section 409.5.d, which gives reporters and photographers the right to get up-close and personal to any disaster scene.

But getting up-close and personal to the people involved is harder – especially if you care about them.

I tend to like 99 percent of the people I meet, which makes my job both easy and difficult. Easy, because I truly enjoy talking to my fellow humans, even if I don't always understand them. And difficult, because I don't want to bother them when they have more important things to do.

One of the big criticisms directed toward us news-types is the "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality, such as when some TV talking-head jams a microphone into a disaster-victim's face to ask, "How does it feel to see your life horribly changed for the worse?"

Fortunately, Sonoma Valley is a small enough place to where the *Index-Tribune* doesn't have to stoop to such a level. One of the things I always tell people at a fire scene is that they have much more important things to do at the moment than chat with me – but that since the Valley is so closely-knit, our readers probably want to know if their neighbor is okay. And that if they do want to say anything in print, I'd be more than happy to report it.

Most people want to talk. Some don't. So far, though, nobody has tried to deck me while they cope with a tragedy.

But everybody is coping with tragedy, all the time, whether we admit it or not. It's in the nature of life for it to fall short of our expectations and ideals – so all we can really do is

help each other out as needed. Picking up the pieces and assembling them in newer, better puzzles.

And whether that's through prayer, action, speech or silence – it's the most important thing we'll ever do.