



# From The Ashes

## A COLLABORATION RISES

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEN BAXTER

*When women support each other, incredible things happen.*

The company we keep largely determines how we experience life. This is one of the most poignant lessons I've learned in my own personal and creative growth. It was especially true in 2017 when I was the assistant director for a five-day women's photography camp called Firefly Institute in the Bay Area. A few days before camp was scheduled, fires broke out that devastated Santa Rosa and Sonoma County.

Originally, Firefly was founded in 2016 by my friend Hillary Sloss. She was an ex-photojournalist and this was her long-held vision. A place where collaboration, community, and top-notch teaching were mixed with laughter, campfires, and square dancing. After spending many years in the competitive environment of photojournalism, she longed to create an opportunity for artistic women to come together and learn from each other, the first camp was just that. Fifty women gathered at the beautiful and relaxing Westerbeke Ranch in Sonoma. We had amazing food and incredible teachers. For five days we lounged in a creative bubble that started with morning yoga classes and culminated in happy hour by the pool.

After the first year, Hillary sold the camp to her friend Pam Sogge who had been a part of that experience. Many of the same women signed up again. Pam would carry on the vision of women connecting, learning, and growing through their photography. »

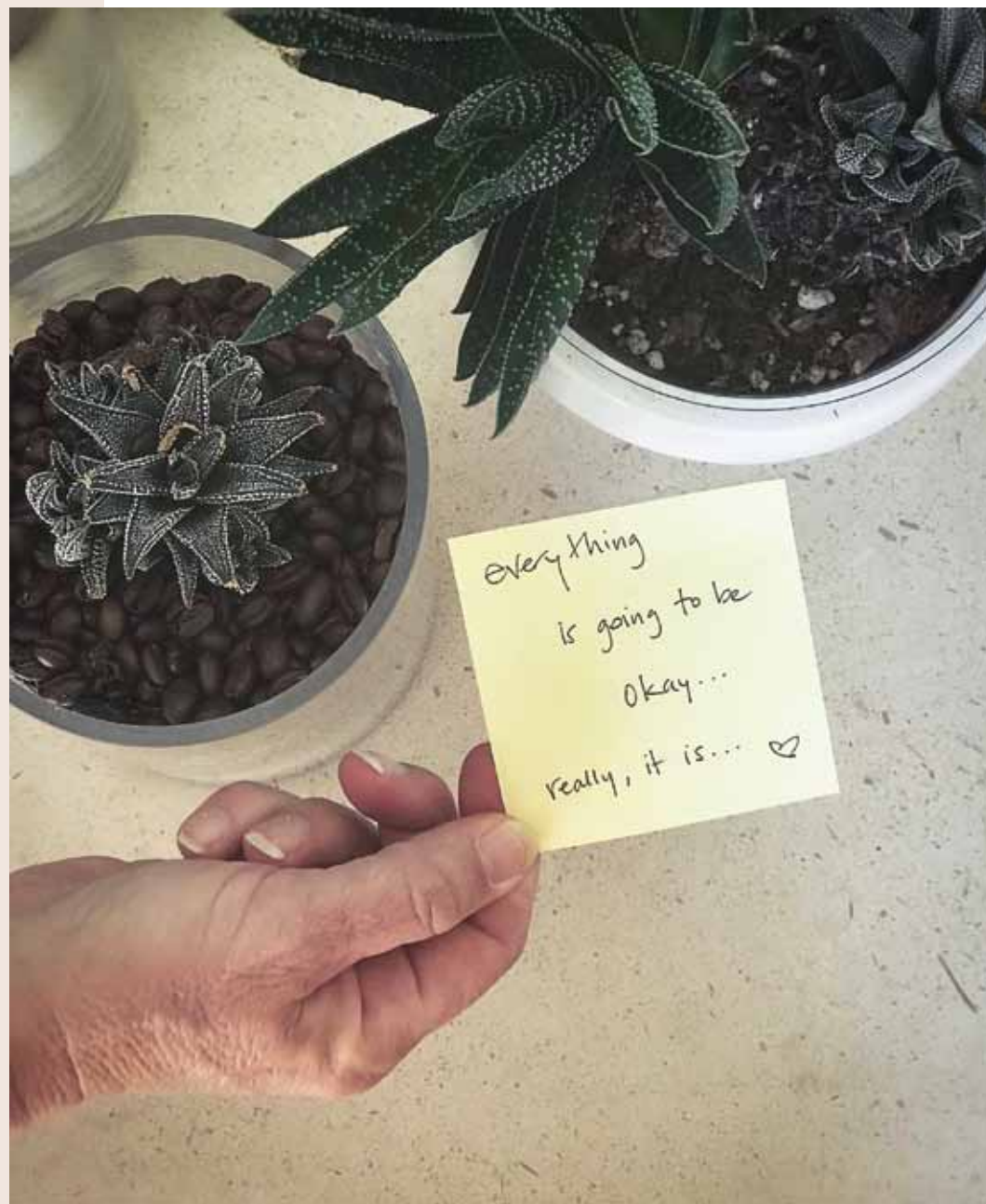




*But life threw us a curve ball.*

As the fires spread, we realized Sonoma was out of the question and Westerbeke Ranch was evacuated. One of our core teachers, Laurie Klein, had flown in from the East Coast. A returning camper, coming all the way from New Zealand, arrived in SFO to find out that Santa Rosa was engulfed in flames. She had to adjust her jet lag and her high hopes.

*These situations are always a crossroads. Under this kind of stress we see what people are made of. Many times, like this one, we can experience the strength and power of the collective. This wasn't a group of complacent, ordinary women.»*





Pam had to pivot within 48 hours and make some serious decisions. People were looking forward to this creative time together. Connections had organically grown since the last one. There was momentum through the women who lived in the area and they wanted a place to come together during this dramatic time.

In what felt like one day, someone volunteered their home as the class location. Another two offered to have people stay overnight and host dinner for everyone. Then, two other women opened up their homes for people to stay. Forty-eight hours later, a two-day “pop-up” camp was born for the people who lived in the area. This was when camp became something created not just by one person, but by a group of strong, collaborative women working together. These women made it happen for themselves and everybody else.

The weekend organically took shape because everyone collectively became part of the programming. Laurie held multiple photo shoots in the pool, guiding us through how to shoot bodies in water by working with a model. We explored how to express an emotion and feeling we want to convey. She introduced us to infrared photography and the ethereal aesthetic it produces. We had classes on lighting, photo-book creation, self-portraiture mixed with writing, and iPhoneography.

It was an amazing blend of creative talents. The teachers brought their enthusiasm, good humor, and top-notch teaching skills. We laughed, learned from each other, and reconnected. Something new began taking shape.

The metaphor for a firefly is illumination. Its symbolic meaning is that our physical appearance does not define us. Rather, it’s what’s inside our hearts and minds that represents what each of us are made of. *When women work together from a place of genuine collaboration and community, we have the collective power to change the world.*

The next Firefly Women’s Photography Camp is taking place April 18–22, 2018 at Westerbeke Ranch in Sonoma. You can find more information at [FireflyInstitute.com](http://FireflyInstitute.com).

Jen Baxter is a writer, photographer, and content creator. She tells stories encouraging people to be more independent, aware and creative. You can find more work at [JenBaxter.com](http://JenBaxter.com) and follow her on Instagram @JenBaxterSF

PROMPT

The Power of Collaboration

*Life doesn't go according to plan much of the time.*

Can you recall one of the times you came together with other people to make something powerful or special happen?