

Oakland hills fire survivors' advice for Wine Country: 'You can't rush it'

It will all come in waves: Anguish over loss. Frustration with insurance companies and building contractors. Fear.

That's what's in store for months to come for those savaged by the fires ripping through Wine Country and beyond this week. None of their neighborhoods will look the same again for years.

But, eventually, homes, schools and businesses will sprout back in what are now smoking ash fields. And as those who survived the devastating Oakland hills blaze of Oct. 20, 1991, say — usually with a heavy sigh — life will move on and get back to something resembling normal.

It's just not going to be an easy journey.

"The first thing to remember is to take care of yourself and to recognize that for most people, what burned is just stuff," said Sue Piper, who fled the flames on a smoke-choked road 26 years ago as her house in Hiller Highlands burned to the ground. It was one of 3,276 homes incinerated on that hot, windy Sunday, a day when 25 people lost their lives.

"If you've got your loved ones, that's what's most important in life," Piper said. "Also, don't be in a big hurry. This process of rebuilding your life — and it's not just your home, it's your life — can take more than a year, and more. You can't rush it."

Piper rebuilt her house with insurance money and, as with most 1991 fire survivors, it took two years. She wound up with a house twice the size of the one that was destroyed, and the new one had nice touches that the old one didn't have. But she'd



trade it all for not having to go through the ordeal.

One of the lessons for many hills fire survivors was that banding together got a lot more done than going it alone.

Neighbors all over the hills, from the southern edge of Berkeley to Montclair in Oakland, began meeting shortly after the flames were snuffed to talk about how to handle their rebuilding and their trauma. That quickly coalesced into three "phoenix" community organizations.

The phoenix groups organized meetings with insurance and building experts on how to deal with compensation forms, contractors and city planners. They secured group discounts on furniture and the like, helped people negotiate better insurance settlements and forced Oakland to tighten fire-safety building codes.

Veterans of the groups still push for weed abatement, road widenings and other fire-safety improvements, saying the Oakland-Berkeley hills are ripe for another conflagration.

Many of those burned out of their hill homes were well-educated and well-heeled, so they had more money and time to fight for

what they wanted. "A lot of us were movers and shakers, so we moved and we shook," Piper said. "We had no homes, but we had resources."

The 1991 blaze was the most destructive wildland-interface fire in American history to date, but with the Wine Country blazes covering a much larger area, that kind of community bonding may be more difficult. The fires in Napa and Sonoma counties alone had rampaged across at least 92 square miles by Tuesday afternoon, while all the damage in Oakland was done in just 2 square miles. "No matter what, be prepared to become politically active, to engage with your community," said Barry Pilger, whose home on Buckingham Boulevard in Berkeley was leveled in 1991.

"Your neighbors are going to need your help, you are going to need help, and even the building authorities are going to need your help to do the right thing."

He urged that...

"...before signing any contract for insurance payout or rebuilding, people who lost everything in the North Bay should hire an independent expert for advice."

"I'm sure that 90 percent of the people who lost homes in this latest

fire aren't familiar with their insurance policies or what it takes to build a home," said Pilger, who like Piper took two years to rebuild his house. "So it's going to be a learning process. "Don't be afraid to hire a contractor or a professional insurance adjuster — anyone who can work up an estimate that you can take to the insurance company, or whoever, and will be so compelling that they have to give you what you need," Pilger said.

“If you are vigilant and have the right professional help, things can work out OK.”

Piper and Pilger were both involved in the phoenix groups, and they turned their experiences into activism that continues to this day.

Piper is president of the Oakland Firesafe Council, a group of hills fire survivors that advocates for fire safety, and is a board member of United Policyholders, a nonprofit that advocates for disaster survivors. Pilger is chairman of the North Hills Community Association, which morphed from one of the phoenix organizations into a community group that pushes for disaster and crime safety.

Some of their other pointers:

- With winter coming, anyplace on a slope that burned will be in danger of mudslides. “Be prepared to tarp, sheet and mulch wherever your house was, if you have any intention of rebuilding,” Pilger said. “We covered our property with mulch and surrounded it with hay bales, and that worked fairly effectively.”
- Try to restore normal routines as quickly as possible for children. “Keep them to their schedules, feed them the food they like, get them back to school as soon as you can,” Piper said.
- Don't be afraid to seek counseling. The family of Virginia Kleker — who was 13 when she survived the fire, suffered from post-traumatic stress and hanged herself 17 years later — advocates for this, as do many other survivors. “You have to mourn what you lost, and seeking counseling is a good thing right away because when you're under stress, it will affect not just your relationships but yourself,” Piper said.

Jim Dexter's home on Merriwood Drive survived the hills fire even as neighbors' homes collapsed into flaming debris around his, but that didn't prevent fear from burrowing into his brain.

“I think about the fire every single day,” said Dexter, who headed up one of the community rebuilding councils after the fire and moved to Martinez four years ago. “It's absolutely terrifying. This fire in the Napa area is so much larger and came so much quicker than ours, but the experience is the same.

“That memory never really goes away.”

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