

# **1 Woman Who Lost Her Home To A Fire In 2003 Steps In To Help Victims Of Woolsey Fire**

NPR

NPR's Scott Simon speaks with fire survivor Karen Reimus whose house burned down in San Diego in 2003. She will be volunteering at a local assistance shelter to help survivors of the wildfires.

SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

California's increasing and increasingly destructive wildfires have created a growing group of people who may be able to offer help. They've survived wildfires themselves and now try to help people who have recently been burned out of their homes, lost loved ones and are trying to live with trauma and loss. Karen Reimus is one of those people, and we reached her at member station KCLU in Thousand Oaks, Calif. Ms. Reimus, thanks very much for being with us.

KAREN REIMUS: I'm happy to be here. Thanks for having me.

SIMON: You're volunteering at a local assistance shelter, I gather.

REIMUS: Yeah. It's a local assistance center for those affected by the recent fires in Ventura and Los Angeles counties.

SIMON: What's it like there?

REIMUS: You know, it's - just about 45 minutes ago, there was a woman at my table literally crying at the table, understandably. Other people are very action-oriented. They, you know, maybe are just kind of stepping immediately into action. And you kind of see the whole range.

SIMON: Yeah. And this is territory you know personally, isn't it?

REIMUS: I do. Unfortunately, I lost my own home in the 2003 Cedar Fire in San Diego.

SIMON: When people sit down with you now, what do they need?

REIMUS: What do they need? I mean, often, it's difficult for people to even articulate a single, identifiable need because it's so overwhelming. And the range of need is so great. I'll give you an example. After my own fire, I had a co-worker - really lovely person - who, you know, called me, and she's like, listen; we're dying to go out there and get some stuff for the kids. Can you just send me a list? And I had to say to her - and no. And this is somebody who wanted to help.

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SIMON: Yeah.

REIMUS: And I just had to say – I’m like, I can’t even create a list right now. Like, it’s – I’m just so overwhelmed. I’m completely stressed out. And I just – do you know what I’m saying? It’s just like...

SIMON: Yeah.

REIMUS: ...You know, you’re not sleeping. You’re traumatized. It’s tough. It’s really tough.

SIMON: Must be very difficult for people who don’t have a fixed address, who may be sleeping on someone’s couch or in a gym, to begin to function and fill out forms and make follow-up calls and get put on hold and all of that.

REIMUS: You’re hitting the nail right on the head. I mean, in my experience, it truly takes weeks/months, honestly, for people to regain kind of normal, critical functioning. Do you know what I’m saying?

SIMON: Yeah.

REIMUS: I mean, it really takes some time. I mean, in terms of recovery, kind of the rule of thumb is one to three years.

SIMON: And where does life find you now? How are you doing as opposed to 15 years ago?

REIMUS: I mean, I woke up this morning in my rebuilt home. I had breakfast in my kitchen. And life is normal. And it’s hard to say when that transition happened because there was a couple years there where I was, you know, Karen Reimus, fire survivor. And now I’m just Karen Reimus again.

SIMON: Yeah. Why did you, I gather, rebuild in the same place that you had been burned out? Some people, I daresay, would’ve avoided that.

REIMUS: You know, I think maybe if I’d lived in a different type of geography, maybe if I’d lived in a more secluded area that was really prone to wildfire – but I’m in the middle of a suburban neighborhood, you know? So going back to where our house was lost, it wasn’t even a second thought to us.

SIMON: Some of the people you’re meeting now, some of the people you met 15 years ago, do those friendships last?

REIMUS: Oh, they do last. Let me tell you. Those are the ties that bind, you know? And one of the most important pieces of advice I offer to new fire survivors is to hold close to those people that you burned down with and especially as time goes on because candidly, like, right after the wildfire loss, there’s a lot of attention, a lot of help. But as time goes on and you’re still dealing with these issues, you know, the next tragedy happens. The next major disaster happens. And attention shifts. So unless you’ve gone through it yourself firsthand, I don’t think it – you can have a true appreciation for how long this process takes and just the enormity of both the insurance recovery and the rebuild.

SIMON: Karen Reimus is an outreach coordinator for United Policyholders. That’s a nonprofit group that’s

trying to provide resources for fire survivors. Thanks so much for being with us.  
REIMUS: Thank you for having me.