

[Fire survivors reunite to mark 10th anniversary](#)

The San Diego Union Tribune

A “low-key” reunion of more than 130 Witch Creek fire survivors and recovery coalition members was held Sunday to mark the wildfire’s 10th anniversary.

“This is a celebration of homecoming and friendship,” Jan Rasmussen told attendees. She was co-chair of Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church’s fire recovery ministry and became a key volunteer with RB United.

The latter organization was formed to help with residents’ recovery efforts and funded by a grant provided by the Rancho Bernardo Community Foundation. RB United’s subsequent efforts have focused on emergency preparation.

“The loyalty, friendship and love that all of us here share will be forever,” said Assemblyman Brian Maienschein. In 2007 he was on the San Diego City Council representing Rancho Bernardo.

“I felt tremendous sadness for my friends and constituents who lost their homes,” Maienschein said. He recalled his first drive through Rancho Bernardo after the wildfire when he saw the devastation left after 365 homes were destroyed and more damaged. “I was determined to do everything I could to help the community I grew up in rebuild.”

Maienschein recalled how he and his staff members walked each block to record the addresses of homes in order to let residents know if they would have a home to return to since they were initially not permitted to re-enter their neighborhoods. He also established a “one-stop shop” in Rancho Bernardo Community Park so over the subsequent months locals would not have to travel all over the county to meet with numerous agencies as they went through the recovery process.

“I am very proud of what we achieved in Rancho Bernardo because it became a model for recovery efforts nationally during disasters,” he said. Maienschein’s model, created by him during the 2003 Cedar fire to help his Scripps Ranch constituents and refined four years later in Rancho Bernardo has been used by FEMA and other agencies in a variety of disasters throughout the U.S. over the past decade.

“When I hear other people mention the fires, I always feel a tremendous sense of pride as to what we accomplished together,” he said, adding, “The relationships we formed were deep and will always be lifelong.”

“This is an opportunity to fellowship with you on a very positive note,” said Valerie Brown, who leads RB United. She is a Westwood resident who did not lose her home and within days volunteered to coordinate the community’s recovery efforts in order to help her neighbors who lost theirs.

“I’m happy to be on the other side with you,” Brown said as she struggled to hold back tears. “Thank you for letting us share this journey with you. We just stood up and did what needed to be done. Thank you for allowing us to be of service.”

“Congratulations everybody, you made it,” said Karen Reimus, a volunteer with United Policyholders and 2003 Cedar fire survivor. United Policyholders is a group that provided locals with its “Roadmap to Recovery” and is currently helping the thousands of fire victims in Northern California.

“We hold you tightly in our embrace,” Reimus said. “United Policyholders values and treasures you. ... Working with your community was such a privilege for me.”

Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church provided the venue for Sunday’s event that was planned by a committee of community members led by representatives from RB United and Maienschein’s Assembly office. The free dinner was donated by Mama Cella’s, Pearl Chinese Restaurant, Brothers Provisions and Souplantation in Rancho Bernardo; plus Athen’s Market Cafe and L&L Hawaiian BBQ in Carmel Mountain Ranch.

Another private event to mark the anniversary was held Saturday night at the Westwood Club in Rancho Bernardo for fire survivors. It was hosted by Fired Up Sisters Southern California, a support group that formed in response to the 2007 fires.