Hope and heartache in the year of fire

The Sacramento Bee

Cobb Mountain – Maya Leonard sighed deeply as she stood between her parents on a sun-dappled morning in late spring, her freckled face somber.

Her mother, Cindy, and father, David, each draped an arm around her shoulders. Maya watched as one of six men in hard hats and heavy boots poured fuel into a chainsaw with a long, jagged blade.

The Leonard family had gathered to say goodbye to the mighty Douglas fir that for 140 years had stood like a sentinel on their property along a winding road in southern Lake County. Once elegant and strong, the tree was now charred and feeble, a casualty of the cataclysmic Valley Fire that swept through the county last September.

“We have a lot of memories,” Maya said. She was going to miss the tree’s piney scent, the boughs where songbirds nested, the summertime shade, the privacy the fir provided. Most of all, she would miss flying through the forest on the handmade swing attached to the tree’s upper branches.

David and Cindy struggled with their own conflicted emotions. The tree, soaring 140 feet into the sky, had become a symbol of their former life on Cobb Mountain, before a wall of flames swallowed up their home and the surrounding forest. But the fir’s age and condition had rendered it a hazard. It would be cut down, along with dozens of smaller trees on their scorched patch of land.

The chainsaw sputtered and coughed, then buzzed to life, and Maya turned her eyes downward. David pulled out his cellphone and began capturing video, tears clouding his vision. Cindy’s lower lip quivered.

If all went as planned, the tree would fall slowly, in the direction of a large notch the men had hacked into its base. The family realized it would land on the spot that for 17 years had been their living room.

The saw bit into the bark and began gobbling the tree’s base. The Leonards clung to one another as the

fir bowed forward, swaying against a backdrop of blue sky and white clouds. On its way down, its surviving greenery brushed against healthier firs, creating a gentle whoosh. It crashed to earth with a violent snapping of branches, followed by a muffled boom.

After that, the only sounds were the chirps of birds, and Maya's sobs as she buried herself in her mother's arms.

'TWO STEPS BACK'

By August, Lake County was on fire yet again.

For the fourth time in little more than a year, sirens screamed down the highways. The chop of helicopter blades cut the air. And residents, this time in the town of Lower Lake, about 10 miles from Cobb, were grabbing clothing, pets and precious photographs and fleeing the flames.

For homeowners in this rustic county, it had been a year of wildfire, fueled by the deadly intersection of human folly and drought-damaged landscape. The Rocky Fire ignited in the county's eastern reaches in July 2015, sparked by a faulty water heater at an illegal marijuana grow, according to Cal Fire investigators. Two weeks later, the Jerusalem Fire erupted just to the south. Combined, the two consumed 49 homes and nearly 95,000 acres of forest and grassland.

On Sept. 12, 2015, a spark investigators attribute to a homeowner's poorly rigged hot tub started another conflagration a few miles west. The Valley Fire raged for more than a week, registering as the third most destructive wildfire in California history. Before containment, it tore through 76,067 acres, killing four people and razing nearly 1,300 houses, including the Leonards' cozy home in the small mountain community of Cobb.

And now, at the height of another dusty, dry summer, came the Clayton Fire, ballooning in the doughnut hole of rugged woodland that had escaped the ring of fires in 2015. This one, investigators said, was set by a construction worker with a history of drug arrests and a penchant for arson. Another 175 homes destroyed, and hundreds more people dislocated, sleeping in temporary shelters and on friends' sofas.

For the Leonards, still struggling to rebuild, it marked another numbing blow. More friends and co-workers traumatized. Newly rising piles of burnt wood, twisted metal and toxic debris, when the old piles

had yet to be buried. More competition for contractors, carpenters, plumbers and permits. Another massive drain on the finances and manpower of one of California's poorest counties.

Nearly 12 months after their home had been reduced to concrete and ash, the family's odyssey stood as both hope and warning for the newest victims of wildfire. Recovery, they were learning, was not so much a road forward as it was a state of being. The Leonards had shelter and income. They had each other, and a rhythm of life.

But it was not the life they had known before fire.

"I'm a 'glass half full' kind of person, but even I have been getting down," Cindy said one afternoon, her voice cracking as she studied the family's adjusted property tax bill, which seemed higher than it should be. "Seems like it's one step forward, two steps back."

David was starting his second year as principal at nearby Cobb Mountain Elementary School, where Maya was a sixth-grader and Cindy a volunteer. Now that the fire damage at the school had been repaired, he was back to a regular work schedule. Maya was back to her homework, music practice and fiddle jams.

Cindy Leonard is overseeing her family's rebuilding efforts. Here she talks with her contractor, Ron Tan, about the possibilities during an event for Valley Fire survivors.
Only Cindy's routines had changed dramatically. She had lost her waitress position when the iconic Tra Vigne restaurant in St. Helena closed in December. While looking for work, she was overseeing the family's rebuilding efforts, meeting with contractors and architects, walking the aisles at Lowe's to price tile and flooring and bathroom fixtures, calling the county departments charged with regulating various aspects of the project.

David and Cindy had hoped that, by now, they would have a target date for moving into their rebuilt home. Instead, they were in their sixth temporary living arrangement, with no clue about when the new house would materialize.

They were pingponging with their insurance company, trying to document every lost item from every room in their burned home. Their minds swirled with the terminology of rebuilding: phrases like encroachment permits, road mitigation fees, setback requirements and compaction reports. They had yet to settle on a new home design that would pass muster with the county and its updated building

requirements.

“It all still feels so overwhelming,” Cindy said. “But we have to keep focused on the big picture.”

In June, the Leonards had moved out of a friend’s home in Cobb and into an RV on the edge of their ravaged property on narrow, winding Rainbow Court. The trailer was 300 square feet, with small windows that looked out over the decimated forest. On one side, Maya slept in a bunk bed with her dolls. On the other, Cindy and David’s mattress took up the entire bedroom. It took timing and effort to move from one side of the trailer to another without knocking over something or bumping into someone.

The kitchen was a far cry from the one at their old home, where the cabinets held Le Creuset cookware and the family engaged in regular “cooking challenges.” But Cindy could make simple meals on the miniature two-burner stove. She kept a bowl of fresh fruit on the narrow rectangle that served as a serving counter. She even hosted her book club, setting out appetizers on a picnic table outside.

Most importantly, the Leonards were waking up on the land where they had lived for nearly two decades. A friend had rebuilt the coop where Maya’s chickens had perished in the Valley Fire, and reinstalled a custom garden gate that had survived the flames. Now, it opened into their new garden, where David was nurturing a few donated trees. Maya was raising three new chickens, one of which she named Grace after a bird that had died.

Months after the fire was extinguished, dozens of Cobb’s residents still slept in trailers or bunked with friends and relatives. A donation center where fire survivors could pick up clothes, diapers, dishes and camping gear was still seeing families.

The forest was so badly scarred that many had trouble imagining it whole again.

Thousands of towering trees that once drew artists, Bay Area refugees and retirees to the Cobb area now lay stacked along the highways. Tens of thousands more would fall, and no one was sure where they would end up.

The market for wood was beyond saturated. California’s few remaining mills were overloaded. Options were so limited that some of the wood was being shipped to China.

As for the surviving forest? It was “starting over,” said Gregory Giusti, a UC Berkeley forestry specialist who was helping the county assess damage.

When Giusti looked at the fire area in spring, he saw a remarkable smattering of wildflowers germinating in spots where trees and shrubs were destroyed. He saw tiny oaks and maples sprouting from burned tree bases. He noticed, however, that pine trees were not faring well. The Valley Fire happened to strike during a “very poor pine cone year,” he said.

No cones, no seeds. No seeds, no seedlings.

Cobb Mountain’s pine forest would have to be replanted, tree by tree, Giusti said. If not, it would become dominated by brush, grass, oaks and other hardwoods.

“Without massive human intervention,” Giusti said, Cobb Mountain was destined to become a very different place.

BACKHOES AND HUGS

Rob Brown stood in the back of the meeting room inside Cobb’s Lions Club building, his face tanned beneath a weathered ball cap, his cellphone buzzing relentlessly.

A couple of fans stirred the late-summer air as about 50 people settled into folding chairs for another emotional discussion about living in a fire zone.

David and Cindy were there with Maya. Cindy, an alternate member of the newly formed Cobb Area Council, scribbled in a notebook as speakers took turns at the microphone. David used his laptop to transmit the night’s agenda on an overhead screen. Maya kept her face buried in a book, “Dragon Kiss,” save for a few moments when she jumped at the sound of a passing firetruck.

As firefighters worked to stifle the Clayton Fire in the town of Lower Lake a few miles to the east, area residents looked to Brown, a county supervisor and lifelong resident, for answers. They had pressing questions about the sluggish pace of cleanup from the Valley Fire. How would the county, strapped for cash, cope with more burned-out buildings, broken sewer lines and roads damaged by heavy equipment? Where would they house the newly homeless families? Would the federal government help?

Brown acknowledged the situation was dire. The Federal Emergency Management Agency would not be funding temporary homes for residents affected by the Clayton Fire, he said. The crisis was not big enough to meet its standards for such assistance.

“To be honest,” Brown said, “we may be out there ourselves with backhoes in an effort to get our friends and neighbors back into their homes. Right now, we have nothing to offer them but a big hug, and that ain’t enough.”

After nearly a year of troubleshooting, Brown was tired. He had been a public servant for 22 years. But nothing, he said, could have prepared him for the weight the fires had laid on his shoulders.

Day and night, people called him for answers: Could he get crews out for property cleanup? Intervene in the permitting process? When would power lines be restored? What about water service? He gave his cellphone number to everyone he encountered and personally returned every call. At the end of some days, he had answered 250 messages. But it was never enough.

“You’re doing your best, and all you hear is people venting, demanding things, yelling,” said Brown. “You have to constantly remind yourself that many of these people have lost everything.”

“People are suffering. I can’t solve all of their problems,” he said. “But I’m doing the best I can. I stand by that.”

Lake County Supervisor Rob Brown said his year-long efforts to help people displaced by wildfires have left him exhausted. “People are suffering. I can’t solve all of their problems,” he said. “But I’m doing the best I can.”

Brown asked people for patience. By virtue of its location and economy, he explained, Lake County’s challenges were particularly daunting.

With about 65,000 people, it is one of the state’s smaller counties, and about a quarter of its residents live in poverty. Some of the neighborhoods hardest hit by the fire were isolated, complicating efforts by the county, utility workers and road crews to gain access.

The Valley Fire alone had caused an estimated $1.3 billion in damage. Lake County would be on the hook

for a portion of it. How much remained uncertain.

FEMA was expected to cover 75 percent of the cost, and the state Office of Emergency Services would cover a share. Still, Lake County could end up with a bill as high as $3 million. That, Brown said, could mean the loss of sheriff's deputies and parks programs.

The recovery process was complicated by major changes in building codes in the years leading up to the fires. In some areas, the required setback between a property line and its buildings had increased from 5 feet to 15 feet. Driveways had to be wider. Sprinkler systems were now mandatory.

Despite doubling its number of inspectors, the county was taking about six weeks to process building permits.

Brown had to admit it. He did not have all the answers.

"We're a small county with small resources," he said, his voice strained. "I actually feel we're ahead of the game in some respects. But people want everything done overnight, and that's not the way it works. It's going to take time."

'COBB WOBBLY'

Not everyone was willing to wait.

Even as recovery was proceeding, it was clear some longtime residents would not be returning to Cobb. About 40 percent of homes destroyed by the Valley Fire likely would not be rebuilt, according to a recent county survey. Their disappearance would change the very fabric of community life.

Tom and Jeannie Kosten were as good as gone.

"When we moved here, this was all forest," Tom Kosten said, gesturing toward the blackened hills on a street virtually wiped out by fire. "Look at it now."

Tom, a postal worker, was planning to retire in seven years. For that still to happen, in terms of their finances, he said, they would have to leave the area.

“This is not the same place,” he said. “If I built a home right here, I might never be able to sell it. It’s sad, but we’re going to leave.”

Their neighbors, Rory and Angie Newman, on the other hand, were among the first in the area to frame a new house.

Sure, they had thought about leaving, Rory said, setting down the drill he was using to transform a freshly cut tree stump into a planter. Their street looked like war zone, and they knew many of their neighbors had given up on Cobb. But the Newmans kept circling back to the same conclusion.

“This mountain, it’s in our blood,” Rory said. “No matter what, we just can’t leave it.”

Others, like Karl and Linda Parker, planned to stay mainly because they had run out of options.

The Parkers were “Cobb strong” in the beginning, believing the community was too special to leave. But after months of spinning their wheels on a recovery plan, they nearly gave up.

“Initially, you’re just elated that you survived,” said Linda. She and Karl had barely escaped Cobb ahead of flames that destroyed the home that doubled as her art studio.

“But later you find out there are so many layers, so many complications, so many things to sort out,” she said. “You just become emotionally defeated.”

After a while, they no longer were Cobb strong. “More like Cobb wobbly,” Karl said.

The Parkers wavered on nearly a weekly basis between re-creating a life in Cobb and relocating to another part of California. They had insurance on their small home, but their reimbursement would fall short of what they needed to rebuild. Like about 60 percent of Valley Fire victims who answered a survey by United Policyholders, a consumer group, the Parkers discovered they had been drastically underinsured.

They considered a manufactured home, which they could get at about half the cost of one built from the foundation up. But they were told it could cost as much as $10,000 to hire a crane to deposit the home onto their property. Building a driveway that met the county’s new specifications could cost thousands

more.

They wondered whether it would make more sense to move closer to their children and grandchildren, who were scattered in Napa, Santa Rosa and Rohnert Park. But that turned out to be a pipe dream.

“The money from our liquidated assets would buy nothing” in those communities, Karl said. Plus, they both had jobs they liked: Karl as a driver for Paratransit and Linda as an art therapist for a hospice program.

“When I think about everything we have to do with the money we will have, it seems incomprehensible,” Karl said. “This fire has opened the lid on a Pandora’s box of options, and it’s exhausting.”

As for the Leonards? Cindy and David never questioned their decision to stick it out on Cobb.

On a recent August morning, sitting in his office at Cobb Mountain Elementary, David reflected on their journey. On the walls around him, his dress clothes – too bulky for the closet of their small trailer – hung from hooks.

Yes, the latest fire was dispiriting, he acknowledged. “A lady who works here lost her home,” he said. “I feel really sad for her.” Some students displaced by the Valley Fire a year earlier were visibly shaken as the Clayton Fire rained ash once again, and David had visited each classroom, assuring them they were safe.

He thought about all of the upheaval of the last year affecting his family, his staff and students, so many friends.

For those in Lower Lake who had lost their homes, “this is only the beginning,” he said. He briefly dissolved into tears, then gathered himself.

“There is no place we would rather be than here,” he said. “This is our community. We are all in this together.”

The previous Sunday, as night fell and news of the Clayton Fire became urgent, the Leonards had driven to the evacuation center in nearby Middletown. Cindy and David passed out blankets and set up cots.

Maya gave teddy bears to the youngest refugees, and made a new friend, a girl whose home was under siege.

Maybe they were rationalizing, David said, but learning that the latest fire was being attributed to arson somehow proved comforting. There was a cause and effect. A suspect was in custody. It wasn't like the universe was gunning for them in an all-out assault.

"The latest fires certainly made everyone ask, 'Really? Again?' " David said. "But nature was not the initiator."

And so, on their barren 2 acres, the Leonards were staying the course.

Not far from the outlines of their new garden lay the remains of their beloved Douglas fir, whose tree swing had kept Maya occupied on so many summer days. It had been sliced into planks, now neatly stacked and covered by blue tarp.

Cindy had been babying the wood, painting the ends of each board with sealer and trying to shield them from moisture. She hoped to preserve enough wood for a door panel, or molding, or maybe a table in their new home.

A cleared area where trees once towered had opened space for a new playhouse and zip line for Maya. The sun shone bright – too bright, it seemed. It would take getting used to.

But under its light, just outside the RV, a pansy had pushed through the ashes and bloomed a brilliant pink.

Cindy smiled at its resiliency.