

'It looked like a nuclear bomb went off:' words of advice from a Tubbs fire survivor

KTVL News 10

PHOENIX, Ore. — Janet Reisner woke up to the smell of smoke on Oct. 8, 2017, when she looked out the window, she saw fireballs landing in her backyard. Her home of 20 years in Santa Rosa, Calif. was one of the 5600 structures lost in the Tubbs fire.

"It looked like a nuclear bomb went off because it was blocks and blocks and miles and miles of nothing," Reisner said.

Now, almost three years after the fire, Reisner is living inside her newly rebuilt home in the same neighborhood and has offered her advice to those that have been displaced due to the recent fires in Oregon.

"People have reached out to me and I feel like it gives me purpose to be able to help people that may be navigating through what they're going through," Reisner said.

You can view her full unedited interview [here](#).

Reisner said the process of rebuilding her home was not easy.

"It was a long process, the worst process that is imaginable, but now we are back in our home, we have a beautiful home," Reisner said. "We've actually had people say to us, oh aren't you glad that your house burned down? Because look how nice your house is."

Reisner said she is not happy her house burned down because she lost things she can never get back; baby pictures, her kid's first steps on tape, her wedding rings, a baby grand piano, and much more.

"I sifted almost every day, I never found my wedding rings. I really never found anything of value, but some people did," Reisner said.

For those that have lost their home, Reisner said not to make any big decisions right away.

"Insurance companies are in it to make money and the less they can pay you, the more money they can make especially with all these fires that have been happening the last several years," Reisner said.

Reisner said the biggest help was [United Policy Holders](#), a nonprofit organization that helps consumers know their rights with insurance companies.

"They were so helpful. They talked about what steps you needed to do to take with your insurance," Reisner said. "The insurance companies are responsible to be updating these policies, but they don't and we're consumers, we don't know our rights about insurance."

Reisner said she even knows many people who did not have insurance and were also helped by United Policy Holders. She said dealing with insurance is hard, but it is important to keep pushing.

"They [insurance companies] are not going to make it easy and if it's not easy then you might give up and they win, so you just can't give up," Reisner said.

Reisner also urges people to be careful when it comes to contractors. After the Tubbs Fire, contractors came in promising very low rates to rebuild people's homes.

"They ended up skipping town with a lot of money," Reisner said.

If you are interested in rebuilding, Reisner said do not give a contractor anything more than \$1000 right away and she advised checking their licenses. Reisner said she even looked at homes the contractor she hired had built prior to signing an agreement with them.

As for [sifting through the debris](#), Reisner said to wear protective equipment and noted that she regrets not wearing more than rubber boots, herself.

"I regret that I don't know what the health implications are," Reisner said. "We've had, we call it, fire

headaches. When the smoke is really bad, we get this headache that we started getting at the time of the fire.”

Reisner also said she and her husband regret not getting mental health help, which they are still dealing with to this day.

“They think that they’re okay but there’s so much simmering anger deep down and loss that you need to process that and we still have a lot of that,” Reisner said.

It is also important to check on neighbors and friends, Reisner said. [In her experience](#), her neighborhood got together and created something called Coffey Strong; a non-profit that helped the neighborhood pull through the disaster.

Reisner explained that it divided the neighborhood into sections to keep things organized.

“If you need help you would go to your section captain and they helped us throughout the entire process,” Reisner said.

Reisner recommends people in neighborhoods, especially those that survived the fire, create a similar model of support.

“Now that we’ve built, we can’t imagine living anywhere else because we could never find neighbors like this. These are people that understood what we’ve gone through and they went through it,” Reisner said.

The Red Cross also helped Reisner and her husband.

“They gave us money per person to try to get started. They replaced our eyeglasses, my husband’s sleep machine, his brace for his knee, medications, things like that, they were wonderful,” Reisner said.

Reisner also recommends for [people to start an Amazon list](#), like the one her children made for her and her husband. People she did not even know were donating and buying items on the list for them such as pots and pans.

“People were very generous and very helpful and they can’t be afraid to accept that help, because they

need it,” Reisner said.