

## [Oakland hills firestorm survivors to North Bay: 'You're not alone'](#)

The Mercury News

OAKLAND — Except for the mailbox, there was nothing to identify the home Risa Nye had known for the past seven years. Blackened box springs and the skeletal remains of appliances protruded from the still smoldering rubble, even though the fire had been extinguished two days earlier. Shaking, she looked at the chimney where she had hung Christmas stockings, breathed in the sulfur stink and felt sick to her stomach.

Everyone here who remembers the fire has just been brokenhearted watching what is happening to all those people in the North Bay),” Nye said. “It’s bad enough seeing what we see now, but also knowing what lies ahead.”

No one knows that long and painful journey from disaster to recovery better than families like the Nyes, who were among the 3,000 people upended by the 1991 Oakland firestorm. As the ravenous, fast-moving flames consumed homes, farms and businesses through Sonoma, Napa and Mendocino counties over the past week, Oakland fire survivors shared their experiences in hopes of offering help and comfort to those now standing in familiar shoes.

There are the practical matters that have to be tended to right away, they recalled: finding housing; buying underwear, towels and dishes; and helping the kids deal with their trauma. Down the road there are insurance companies to negotiate with, and the agonizing decision of whether to rebuild in a community reduced to ashes or pick up and make a fresh start elsewhere.

“The most important thing is knowing your family is safe, you find a place to stay and then you try to break it down,” Nye said. “Don’t rush. Make sure you take your time and don’t overlook anything.”

In the immediate aftermath, survivors said they struggled with emotional trauma, overwhelmed by feelings of anger, sadness, shock — and in some cases survivors’ guilt because they had made it out alive.

“There’s no magic pills — you have to take one day at a time,” said Oakland psychologist Sandra Smith, a grief counselor during the Oakland hills firestorm that left 25 people dead and injured 500 more.

“People should do whatever they can do to help them relax, whether it’s exercise, relaxation, massage, anything that can bring comfort.”

On the first day after the fire that decimated her Hiller Highlands home in Oakland, Sue Piper bought a waffle iron and popcorn maker for her kids, which ended up comforting the whole family. For Victoria Larson, who fled the fire with her husband and 2-year-old daughter, staying with another family while they sought a rental home gave structure to their day. It’s confusing waking each morning disoriented and displaced, not knowing what to do next, she said.

“We’d ... be at a loss of what to do, and the other family) would eat breakfast,” Larson said. “We’d look at them and say, ‘Oh, good idea. Let’s do that.’”

For Robert Knapp, normalcy began to return when schools reopened the week after the fire and his two pre-teen daughters returned to sympathetic friends. Also helpful was when one neighbor, whose house did not burn down, hosted a gathering shortly after the fire for residents in their neighborhood to reconnect and commiserate. The survivors acted as a sounding board for each others’ complaints and a deep well they could tap for advice as the work of navigating insurance claims began.

“The most important thing for all of us was, almost eight of the nine neighborhood families lost their homes, so we had an immediate support group,” Knapp said.

Oakland fire survivors repeatedly said they quickly learned there was strength in numbers and urged those in the North Bay who have lost their homes to organize. Hills neighbors formed community organizations aptly named “phoenix” groups to set up meetings with insurance companies, contractors and city planners. They helped to get survivors group discounts at stores to buy furniture and other replacement items. They designated representatives to attend City Council and Planning Commission meetings and report back to the group while public officials debated changes to the building codes. They babysat each-others kids and shared what resources they had.

“The thing about being in a fire with thousands of other people is you have a huge support network that you don’t get if your house is the only one burned, and no one knows about you,” said Virginia Glickman, who lost her home in the hills above Tunnel Road.

She had just minutes to flee with her husband and teen-age kids. They lost everything, and she cautioned North Bay fire survivors against making “nostalgia purchases.”

“I had a stereo that I hated, but after the fire I wanted to recreate everything, so I went out and bought it again,” Glickman said. “You just want life to go back to the way it was.”

It’s also important to monitor children’s behavior.

Larson’s daughter started refusing to eat all but three of her favorite foods. A psychologist told her the child was trying to exert control in an otherwise uncontrollable situation. Nye’s son started sleeping in his

clothes.

“He couldn’t really verbalize it, but ultimately we figured it out,” Nye said. “If we had to leave, he wanted to be ready.”

For many, it took a while to decide where and how to rebuild. Several people said it was months, even a year or more, before they settled with their insurance companies on a final payout figure. Those payouts often included non-disclosure clauses, Knapp said, so it was critical to speak with friends or neighbors in the same situation prior to finalizing the settlement.

Few had documented the contents of their homes, so they relied on any photos remaining in albums they had grabbed as the fire bore down, or ones they had handed out to friends to remind them what they had lost. And sometimes, people wouldn’t realize something was gone until they went to use it. For Piper, it happened when she wanted to make Christmas cookies and no longer had the recipe book.

The insurance claims process can eat up hours and days, which is why organizations like United Policyholders can be a lifeline. The nonprofit, which helps disaster survivors navigate the often confusing and arduous insurance claims process, kicked into high gear after the Oakland fire. It will soon hold workshops to help North Bay fire victims.

Amy Bach, executive director of United Policyholders, said it’s important for North Bay fire survivors to remember that time is on their side.

“People who are in a rush will succumb to the pressure of ‘Oh my God, I’ve got to hurry up, all the big contractors are going to be snatched up,’” she said. “But the reality is, it really does take quite a while to come to a full understanding of your losses. People who rush into insurance settlements don’t fare as well.”

Larson decided not to rebuild, and her family moved to Piedmont. Both she and her husband are designers, and they knew they would obsess over every detail if they tried to recreate their Oakland Hills home. But Nye and her husband Bruce never considered another option other than rebuilding, and started speaking with architects very soon after the fire. Knapp’s children made the decision for them, expressing a strong desire to return to the home they had always known. Glickman held onto her land, only deciding recently to sell.

For those who chose to stay, the rebuilding process averaged two years once planning started.

“People really need to pace themselves and realize that recovering from a serious loss is a marathon, not a sprint,” Bach said. “Every decision does not need to be made today.”