

[This family lost everything in one of California's worst wildfires. Now, they're almost home](#)

The Sacramento Bee

COBB MOUNTAIN

The wooded path between Maya Leonard's house and the elementary school where she is a sixth-grader remains scarred and blackened, a reminder of the epic wildfire that stole so much from this community on a September afternoon in 2015.

But as she has traveled to and from classes at Cobb Mountain Elementary School in recent weeks, Maya's spirits have lifted day by day. After so many months of chaos and uncertainty, Maya has been watching a new home and a better life finally come into focus.

One day in early March, Maya returned to her family's decimated property, where she and her parents have been living in a cramped RV, to witness the first delivery of wood for their rebuilding project. She smiled brightly as she posed for a photo in front of the stacks. Shortly after that, she saw the skeleton of the 3,000-square foot, two-story home begin to take shape. A few weeks ago, she returned from school to find that the house had a roof.

The winter had been rough for Maya, her mother Cindy and her father David inside their narrow trailer. One night, fierce winds sent a branch from a dying tree crashing onto their roof. Water leaked into the trailer, leaving it moldy, moist and smelly. Things got so bad the family had to move into a replacement RV, which is their seventh temporary residence since flames reduced their house and belongings to rubble.

Maya was more than ready for her eighth and final move.

"Things are coming back to normal, but it's not quite there yet," she said recently as she showed off the partially constructed house, where she will sleep upstairs in a bedroom with a large closet and a reading nook.

For many in the tiny town of Cobb, "normal" still feels like a long way off.

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Cobb, in southern Lake County, was at the epicenter of one of the most destructive wildfires in California's history. Fueled by tornadic winds that ripped through a landscape brittle from years of drought, the Valley Fire destroyed 1,280 homes, gobbled 76,067 acres of forestland and killed four people. It was the biggest of four fires to strike the area in little more than a year.

The Valley Fire was the final straw for some longtime residents.

"We can't make people rebuild," said county Supervisor Rob Brown, who has taken the lead on fire recovery in the area. "A lot of building activity is going on, but I don't have a crystal ball to tell me how many people are going to stay here. We lost a lot of homes, and not all of them will be replaced."

As of April 30, the county had issued 256 permits for replacement homes, Brown said. Additional permits have been granted for temporary dwellings, mobile homes and agricultural structures. The numbers are likely to rise significantly over the summer, Brown said.

One surprising byproduct of the fire, Brown said, was job creation in Lake County, one of California's poorest areas. "In Lake County right now, everyone who wants to work is working," Brown said. "Of course, we wouldn't want a fire every other year to keep the economy going. But it definitely has given us that benefit."

Cleanup continues at the historic Hoberg's Resort, which burned to the ground and left an ugly swath of charred trees along Highway 175 between Cobb and Middletown. The nearby town of Anderson Springs, which was all but wiped out by the fire, expects to have its rebuilt sewer system running later this year. Damaged roads have been repaired. Thousands of trees have been planted, and the county is looking for money to remove numerous dead ones that mar the hillsides.

"We've got to get those trees out of there," Brown said. "It's a safety issue, and it's depressing. It's like a graveyard up there."

For the Leonards, losing the forest was perhaps their biggest loss of all, even bigger than the loss of Maya's pet chickens, family heirlooms, artwork from David's and Cindy's world travels.

But leaving Cobb Mountain was never something they considered. They loved the land, their neighbors and the sense of community. David, principal at Cobb Mountain Elementary, felt a strong sense of obligation to the school and its students. So did Cindy, a volunteer at the school.

"If Dave and Cindy had ended up leaving, I think it would have been very tough on everyone," said Rod Tan, a friend of the Leonards and a contractor who is helping build their new house. "They're such strong people, and they felt a big responsibility to this community. It meant a lot to everyone that they decided to stay."

The responsibility weighed heavily at times. In quiet moments, they sometimes dissolved into tears as they counted the community's losses. David and Cindy channeled their emotions into volunteer work and meetings focused on the recovery process. They worked hard to cobble together a sense of normalcy and routine for their daughter even though they knew, deep down, that life would never be quite the same. Finally, with their yellow building permit tacked to an outside wall of their new house, it seemed they could take a deep breath.

"There's nothing like coming home now," David Leonard said on a recent Saturday, as he stood in the room that eventually will be the family's kitchen. Sunlight filtered through the window frames, and birds flitted through the surviving evergreens on the property along a winding, unpaved road on Upper Rainbow Court.

David pointed to a constellation of small trees that he, Cindy and Maya had planted, and the wildflowers and lavender tulips blooming in the backyard. "The transformation of the landscape, and the progress made on this house, is so uplifting to me," he said. "It's really exciting."

On this day, the family was celebrating with a framing party.

Friends and relatives were drifting into the house, oohing and aahing over its size and special touches: the music room, where the family would store and play their instruments; the windows looking out into the forest; the expansive kitchen. Maya identified each room with a sign, complete with an illustration. Visitors nibbled on snacks and sipped wine as they swapped stories about their own rebuilding experiences.

"Oh my gosh, it's amazing!" Stephanie Parry gushed as Cindy led an impromptu tour. "I'm so happy for you."

"It's coming together!" Cindy said as she led Parry and others up the stairs. Maya offered each guest a marker to write sentiments on the house's frame. Those positive thoughts, the family decided, would follow the family into their new home, which they hoped to occupy by the winter holidays.

"I'd like to have them in by Thanksgiving," Tan said, although Christmas might be more realistic.

One problem, however, still followed the Leonards like a dark cloud. They had yet to reach a final agreement with their insurance company about compensation for their home and belongings.

"I keep writing checks and hoping things get settled, but we still don't know how much money we have to rebuild," Cindy said.

Some of their neighbors had accepted early settlement offers and quickly rebuilt their homes or moved into manufactured structures. The Leonards got a check right away to cover furniture and other household items but have been reluctant to spend that money as they fight for higher reimbursement for

their burned home. A mediator now was brokering negotiations between them and their insurance company.

“We’ve been living very lean,” Cindy said. Being in limbo is a little scary, she admitted.

Emily Rogan of United Policyholders, a nonprofit group that helped Valley Fire survivors navigate the insurance quagmire, said her organization advises people to fight for the best settlement possible but not at the expense of their physical or emotional health.

“We know that the longer that people are in limbo, the more that things like jobs and relationships tend to fall apart in their lives,” Rogan said. “So we have evolved over the years from advising people to fight for every dime they can get to telling them to learn the tools to get the best settlement they can, and move on.”

In “total loss cases,” Rogan said, it is not unusual for families to negotiate for up to two years with their insurers, going back and forth on everything from the costs of everything from drawer pulls to windows. “It’s an arduous process,” she said. “If you manage to get into your home within two years, you’ve done great.”

The Leonards were almost there. And for that, they felt grateful.

On the morning after the framing party, they ate breakfast inside their partially constructed home with good friends from out of town. Then they walked through the house and read the words that their party guests had scribbled on the exposed beams, ledges and stairs. Some of the sentiments made them laugh. Some brought them to tears.

“Welcome to your new windows to the world,” read one scrawl, on a ledge overlooking Maya’s backyard playhouse.

“Keep these stairs strong and steady for these happy people.”

“Hello, house! I knew the house that was here before you. It was full of joy ...”

One friend used a window sill to quote a poem by Emily Dickinson about the building of a house.

“Then the scaffolds drop,” the poem concludes, “affirming it a soul.”

Cynthia Hubert: 916-321-1082, @Cynthia_Hubert