

Residents react to devastation with shock, fortitude

ANDREA MOSS
STAFF WRITER

Westwood fire victims find comfort in others' support, small items salvaged from damaged homes

RANCHO BERNARDO — Carrol Noe found a bit of joy in a few pieces of Flow Blue china. Her son, Tim, found it in his wife's wedding band. And for Caren Sheffler, it was the sight of a dirty but alive rabbit hunkered in flooded bushes outside her half-burned family room's door.

"When I saw it, I was so happy I just started jumping up and down," Sheffler said about the family pet. "We couldn't fit it in the car when we left, so all I could do was open the cage, set it out and hope it would run. ... I couldn't believe it was right there."

Westwood fire victims savored those small pleasures and whatever others they could find Thursday after they were allowed back into their badly burned neighborhood for the first time since the Witch Creek fire whipped through before dawn Monday. The massive blaze destroyed an estimated 308 homes in Rancho Bernardo, with more than 100 of those in the Westwood community west of Interstate 15.

A city tally of the lost properties had given many homeowners some idea about whether their homes were gone by Wednesday. Others said they had seen their houses either burning or still standing on TV news broadcasts.

Roadblocks that kept people out of the community for three days after the fire denied many residents from verifying the status of their properties, though. When the roadblocks came down just past noon Thursday, a steady stream of vehicles began pouring into the neighborhood.

Returning evacuees' shock at what they saw was evident in the single-digit speeds at which they drove and the stunned or horrified looks on their faces. But they also displayed fortitude and a determination to see each other through this grim chapter of their lives.

"We're going to have to take care of everyone," said resident Kristen Carpenter, whose house did not burn. "We're going to get through this."

Sally and Tim John were among the first to visit their

destroyed home Thursday. Escorted into the neighborhood by a Farmers Insurance representative ahead of the roadblocks' removal, the couple said they had time to grab just a few items — some photos, a laptop and work files — before they fled the flames about 4:30 a.m. Monday.

"I think I knew (the house was lost) when we left — when I saw the fireball up the hill and down the hill," Tim John said.

He said he and his wife never thought they had anything to worry about fire-wise, because the 20,000-acre San Dieguito River Park was behind their home. Sally John said she will miss lost little items that the couple's children gave them and things like the letterman's jackets her kids earned in

high school. All were lost.

Still, "they always say things don't matter, and they don't. That's so cemented in here," she said, patting the area above her heart.

Describing the neighborhood as one full of old-fashioned neighborliness and spirit, though, Tim John said the couple will rebuild. In the meantime, they said, they are drawing comfort from the kindness of others.

"I've gotten hugs from strangers," Sally John said. "The compassion ... that's the beauty that comes out of this."

Cherie Guerrero was lucky enough to find her Creciente Court house intact when she arrived home around 12:30 p.m. Standing with her hand over her mouth and her eyes filled with tears while looking at

three houses that burned to the ground across the street, though, Guerrero said she felt sick about her neighbors' losses.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "The devastation and to lose every single thing you have 'cause we didn't have time to take anything ..."

On Azucar Way, Juliette Pastor struggled with her emotions as she stood in the driveway after she and her family walked around the ruins of the house Pastor and her husband, Leo, bought in

1984. The middle-age couple raised two sons and a daughter in the home, Juliette Pastor said.

Drawing her breath deeply, she said, "It's so hard ..."

Her husband tried to keep things in perspective, saying the family's lives were more important than any house.

"We have to thank God that we survived this," Leo Pastor said. "Some people say we are victims of the fire in San Diego. But no. We say we are not victims — we are

survivors."

Farther up the street, Carrol and Bob Noe's sons helped the couple, who are in their 60s, sift through the ruins of the place they called home for 10 years. Tim Noe, 31, said he, his wife Jennifer and their 4-year-old son, Tim, were in the house when the fire hit the neighborhood, but his parents were on vacation in Charleston, S.C.

On Thursday, the family searched the rubble for family jewelry and any other personal items they might find. Together, they soon unearthed a small but growing pile of pieces from Carrol Noe's Blue Flow china collection, and Bob Noe put a smile on his son's face when he handed over Jennifer's ash-encrusted diamond wedding band, grinning as he told his son it meant he was still married.

Carrol Noe said she wasn't really worried about having to start over.

"The (loss of) things my mother gave me — she died about 12 years ago — and things my mother-in-law gave me ... I regret that," she said. "That's sad. But furniture, your house, those things can be replaced."

Half a block away, Sheffler toured her partially burned house with her three children and one of their friends, who had lost his home a street away. Although her sons, Brandon, 13, and Tristen, 10, chattered away with their friend throughout the visit, her 11-year-old daughter, Ashlyn, was her mother's silent and solemn shadow until she spotted something on the family's dining room table.

"Mom, I saw my homework project," the girl said excitedly. "And it's OK."

Saying she knew more Rancho Bernardo residents who had lost their homes than one who had not, Sheffler counted her blessings.

"I'm just so blessed that my kids are safe," she said. "It (the fire) could have happened at 4 in the afternoon when we were scattered all over. And all my mementos are in the garage, and that's fine."

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Deborah Ahlgreen, left, and her daughter Briana, 17, sit on top of their car as they and thousands of other evacuees waiting to go to their homes sit in gridlock traffic on West Bernardo Drive while President Bush visits nearby in Rancho Bernardo on Thursday. Below, Amanda Fonseca hugs her grandfather Jim Fratis as she and other family members help scavenge for salvageable items in the rubble of Fratis' home destroyed by a wildfire on Agumiel Road in Rancho Bernardo. (Photos by HAYNE PALMOUR IV / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)



Firefighters suffer aches, pains in grueling environment

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NORTH COUNTY — Fresh off the fire line, where the air was choked with ash and acrid smoke, Tulare County firefighter Toni VanGaasbeek, 22, relaxed on the grass at Kit Carson Park in Escondido on Thursday and stifled intermittent coughs.

Scattered around the staging area, dozens of other firefighters blinked bloodshot eyes and stretched their stiff limbs.

For the men and women battling the blazes that have ravaged the region this week, aches and pains — from irritated throats to sprains to burns — are an accepted occupational hazard.

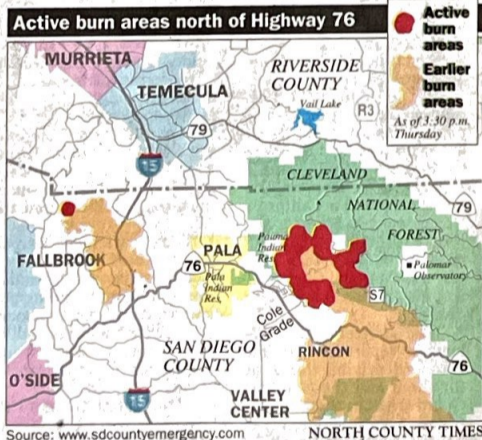
Many have worked grueling shifts — in some cases, more than 48 hours — in one of the world's most aggressive environments.

"The first few days were the worst," said CalFire firefighter Robert Jimenez, 33, who began battling the Witch Creek fire when it began in Ramona on Sunday. "We were basically in an ember storm, sucking that stuff in."

By Thursday afternoon, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection put the injured firefighter tally at 42 from the Witch Creek, Harris, Poomacha and Rice fires, which have devastated San Diego County over the past five days.

The most severe injuries came Sunday afternoon, when four firefighters on the Harris fire "had some significant burn issues," said CalFire spokesman Matt Streck.

Injuries are only reported to the media if they're serious



enough to take a firefighter away from the action, Streck said. Smaller aches, pains and irritations are just part of the job, and firefighters learn to suck it up.

"Since day one of these fires, I've had something in my left eye, and I haven't had a chance to get it out," said Streck, his voice tinged with fatigue. At a medical tent at Kit Carson park, Tim Day — a physician's assistant treating inmate firefighters for the California Department of Corrections — said he's primarily dealt with skin and eye problems.

"When you think of all the things that could happen, we've been very fortunate," Day said Thursday. But that could change in the next few days, he said. With the wind dying down and hand crews digging deeper into the brush, Day predicted, "we're going to see a mushrooming of severe poison

oak," which can irritate the skin, and, when burned, inflame the lungs.

And that's not all. Life on the fire line inevitably means spending long hours in harsh smoke, often with just a bandana over your face (other masks can be too restrictive for the sweltering environment), firefighters said.

"There's a lot of debate out there about what the long-term effects are," Streck said. "The concern is not really the particulates, but it's the chemicals in the air."

Wildfire smoke contains hundreds of compounds, including carbon monoxide, suspended particulates, and dangerous gasses called aldehydes, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

As a precautionary measure, CalFire tests its employees' respiratory capacity on a semi-annual basis, Streck said.

Dr. Martin Nielsen, a pul-



JAMIE SCOTT LYTLE / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection firefighter Toni VanGaasbeek 22, of Tulare, coughs as she and her fellow firefighters rest under a tree at Kit Carson Park in Escondido on Thursday afternoon, after working on the front line of the fires.

monary and critical care critical care specialist at Tri-City Medical Center, said the likelihood of developing permanent lung problems from exposure to wildfire smoke over a relatively short duration — compared to, say, a lifetime smoking habit — was low.

But the story may be different for long-term firefighters, he said.

"Down the line, if a person has had enough exposure, conceivably they could have

chronic bronchitis or chronic asthmatic bronchitis from that exposure," Nielsen said.

Asked about the health hazards of battling the San Diego blazes, Mike Reeder, a CalFire firefighter for 23 years, said it was just the "nature of our job."

Relaxing in the shade at Kit Carson, Reeder lit a cigarette and joked about injuries he'd suffered over the years: burns on his nose and feet, a torn knee ligament, broken ribs.

"We call him granddaddy," Jimenez quipped.

Reeder said wildland firefighters know what they're getting into when they accept the job.

"You save one life, it makes your whole career," he said.

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