

Independent Summit residents forced to ask for help

By LAWRENCE M. FISHER

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SANTA CRUZ — With its sculptured gardens and cantilevered decks overlooking wooded canyons, Sandra and Forrest Hill's home high in the Santa Cruz Mountains was the kind of magic place only long years of hard work and personal care could make.

Now it is ruins, its slab foundation cracked in half, the living room ceiling's beams collapsed, the stone fireplace crumbling more with each aftershock.

Around the house are deep fissures in the ground. The Hills have begun to wonder if they will be allowed to rebuild here.

They say it is harder to cope, not easier, with the passing of time.

Adrenaline wears off and a weariness mounts, born of sleepless nights camped on the lawn and aching days removing broken glass and once-prized possessions from the rubble.

"That very first night," Mrs. Hill said, "I went into the garden and got tomatoes and basil; we barbecued a chicken and cracked open a bottle of wine. I just

Earthquake 1989 - San Lorenzo Valley / Summit
went into my nurturing mode. But as it's gone on it's gotten progressively worse so I can't even cook now. Now I'm being nurtured and it just blows me away; it's overwhelming to be so needy."

She is an American Airlines flight attendant and the mother of two teen-agers; he is a building contractor.

Now the Hills and many neighboring mountain residents are taking most of their meals at the Summit Community Center, a gymnasium they built together last year at C.T. English Middle School where the Red Cross has set up a shelter.

These are independent people, many of them firmly committed to self-sufficiency. To accept aid from outsiders only adds to their psychic discomfort.

"I think we are more ready to take help from each other than from the agencies," said Maggie Brittin, whose house on Terrace Grove Road shifted 12 inches on its foundation. "It's hard to even come up here to eat."

The atmosphere at the center is strained and strange — the children playing volleyball at one end

of the room, the parents in muted conversations as they eat the dinner prepared by the Red Cross.

Aftershocks seem to come every few minutes. Each time, spines stiffen and there is a silent exchange of glances.

Roger Hansen, a Santa Clara County building inspector, said he watched from a neighbor's garden as the house he built 10 years ago collapsed. "After a while you get numb to the offers of help; you don't want to hear them anymore," he said.

With no earthquake insurance, with all his savings tied up in the house, Hansen is now living in his ex-wife's garage while he saves to make first-and-last-month's rent somewhere.

"You read about the homeless; now I am a homeless," he said.

The congregation of the Skyland Community Church (Congregational) held services in the parking lot Sunday because the 102-year-old church has slid four feet off its foundation.

Its entryway is collapsed and the chimney has tumbled to the ground, but congregants said they

would rebuild the old church, which according to local legend was hauled back on its foundation with horses after the 1906 quake.

"They're saying, 'Let's do it ourselves — let's not let the county get involved,'" said the Rev. Mary Jo Sieders, the interim pastor who preached her first sermon here just a week ago.

Many mountain residents did not have earthquake insurance, which has high premiums and deductibles.

There have been mysterious fires in damaged homes that have been vacant for days, inspiring sardonic remarks about "spontaneous combustion" from angry neighbors. Some of them suspect arson by owners to collect insurance.

But even those who have earthquake insurance may face an uncertain future.

Many homes here were built before there were building codes or with little regard for them. It may be impossible to get building permits after Santa Cruz County inspectors check the damaged homes, or to qualify for bank loans to build on lots now considered questionable.