

Mud, sweat and tears: Felton Grove rebuilds after the flood

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Felton Grove — where 54 cottages huddle under shade trees near the San Lorenzo River off Graham Hill Road — is a born-again neighborhood.

Ten months ago, the cottages were battered by flood waters and mud which washed down the San Lorenzo Valley during last winter's incessant rains.

The mud was six-feet deep and the streets became rivers. Some residents were evacuated by firemen with boats. One pet Peruvian parrot was rescued by canoe.

Water was up to the waist of resident Ramona Burgdorf, as she circled the neighborhood to be sure the elderly were safe.

Porches were torn from houses and carried with the mud down the street. A Japanese tea garden was ruined. A heavy barbecue floated off a deck and into a neighbor's yard. Carpets became mudflats.

When the storm calmed, Felton Grove was a mess.

Septic tanks had overflowed and garbage was everywhere.

"It was gross. It was like a bizarre landscape from a Fellini film," said Burgdorf.

Now, houses have been repainted, re-drywalled and remodeled. Faulty wiring has been fixed. Wrecked fences repaired. Floors replaced.

Grass is finally sprouting and roses are blooming.

But the restoration of Felton Grove has meant blood, sweat and tears for many months.

"Volunteer help left around Easter time. Since then it's been everyone for themselves," said Burgdorf.

Resident Russel Unruhe, a chimney sweep, has lifted the foundation of his bungalow onto concrete blocks. When the job is done, he hopes the house will sit high enough to escape future flood damage.

Unlike most residents, Unruhe had flood insurance. He said the insurance company paid him \$16,000 for repairs and \$2,000 to replace personal belongings. Unruhe figured he had \$10,000 worth of lost or damaged personal belongings.

A few residents received government emergency aid.

"Everybody went down to FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) to find out about aid, but only a few were helped," said Burgdorf.

One couple who did qualify for a loan from the Small Business Administration beautified their home.

"The house is gorgeous. It was a shack," said Burgdorf.

Burgdorf, her husband, Daniel, and their 4-year-old daughter Andrea, also had insurance, but the family is running out of money make repairs.

The carpet which was destroyed by mud had been bought just four days before the flood, said Burgdorf.

She said she finally bought a new mattress after sleeping on a moldy one for nine months. She has stalked antique warehouses and flea markets to replace furniture.

Someone donated a four-post bed for her daughter's bedroom.

The family also received a \$3,400 grant from the state to repair a dryer, replace tools, pillows, coffee pot, broom, mop and furniture.

But Burgdorf said by the time she received the money six months after the flood, she had already replaced most of those things.

She was amused the state allowed \$90 for "toilet articles."

She was not amused that the state would pay to repair her dryer, but not to replace it. She said the cost of repairs has been equal to the cost of a new dryer.

Burgdorf and Ben Lomond resident, Karen Martin, were the self-appointed coordinators of the Felton Grove clean-up.

"It made me feel better to do something rather than moan and groan over my own house," said Burgdorf.

Martin said she had gone to Felton Grove to help a friend dig out a house and stayed to coordinate the volunteer emergency help.

Food and other emergency relief was received from the Mennonite Brethren Church; inmates from Soledad State Prison ("They were great," said Burgdorf); county sheriff's volunteers; Salvation Army; First United Methodist Church of Santa Cruz and other churches.

The Burgdorf home became a hubbub of activity.

"The phone was ringing off the hook. I needed a secretary," she said.

She said FEMA gave her phone number to those inquiring about emergency aid.

"They thought I was some kind of disaster relief center. I would answer the phone and say: 'This isn't a disaster relief center. I AM the disaster.'"

One house burned down during the cleanup. Burgdorf said the cause of the fire was a heater left on by a teenager who had moved into the vacant home.

A big task was removing truckloads upon truckloads of mud.

The mud, now dirt, now lies in a vacant field opposite the Felton Fair shopping center. The field used to be flat. Now it is hilly.

Wildflowers and weeds poke through the mounds.

"My daffodil bulbs are in there somewhere," Burgdorf said.

The dirt pile also includes mud taken from another Felton neighborhood which was badly hit during the flood — Gold Gulch.

A few months ago, the dirt pile was "red-tagged" by county officials who said it was illegal to put land fill onto a flood plain.

The residents have an agreement with the county whereby the dirt must be removed by Nov. 1.

If it is not removed, there is a chance it could slide onto Felton Grove or other areas when the winter rains come again.

The residents will sponsor a dirt give-away Oct. 21-24. If it rains, the event will take place the following week.

Mark Sennett, the son of one of the owners of the lot, will help load the dirt onto pick ups.

Persons who would like free dirt should come to the dirt pile with their trucks, said Burgdorf.

"It's good dirt. Good topsoil," she said.

During the dirt give-away the residents will also ask for donations to help fix their private road.

A county project to repair drainage in the Graham Hill/Felton Fair area hinges on the repair of the road.

The First United Methodist Church of Santa Cruz disaster relief fund will donate \$20,000 for the road repair once the resi-

dents have a sound engineering plan, said Burgdorf.

The problem, she said, is residents do not yet have enough money to pay for an engineer.

This year was not the first Felton Grove has flooded. Heavy winter rains are always a threat.

"Some people say we're fools for living here... but it's a super-nice neighborhood," said Burgdorf.

She added: "I wouldn't mind not being here this winter, though...how about Arizona?"

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