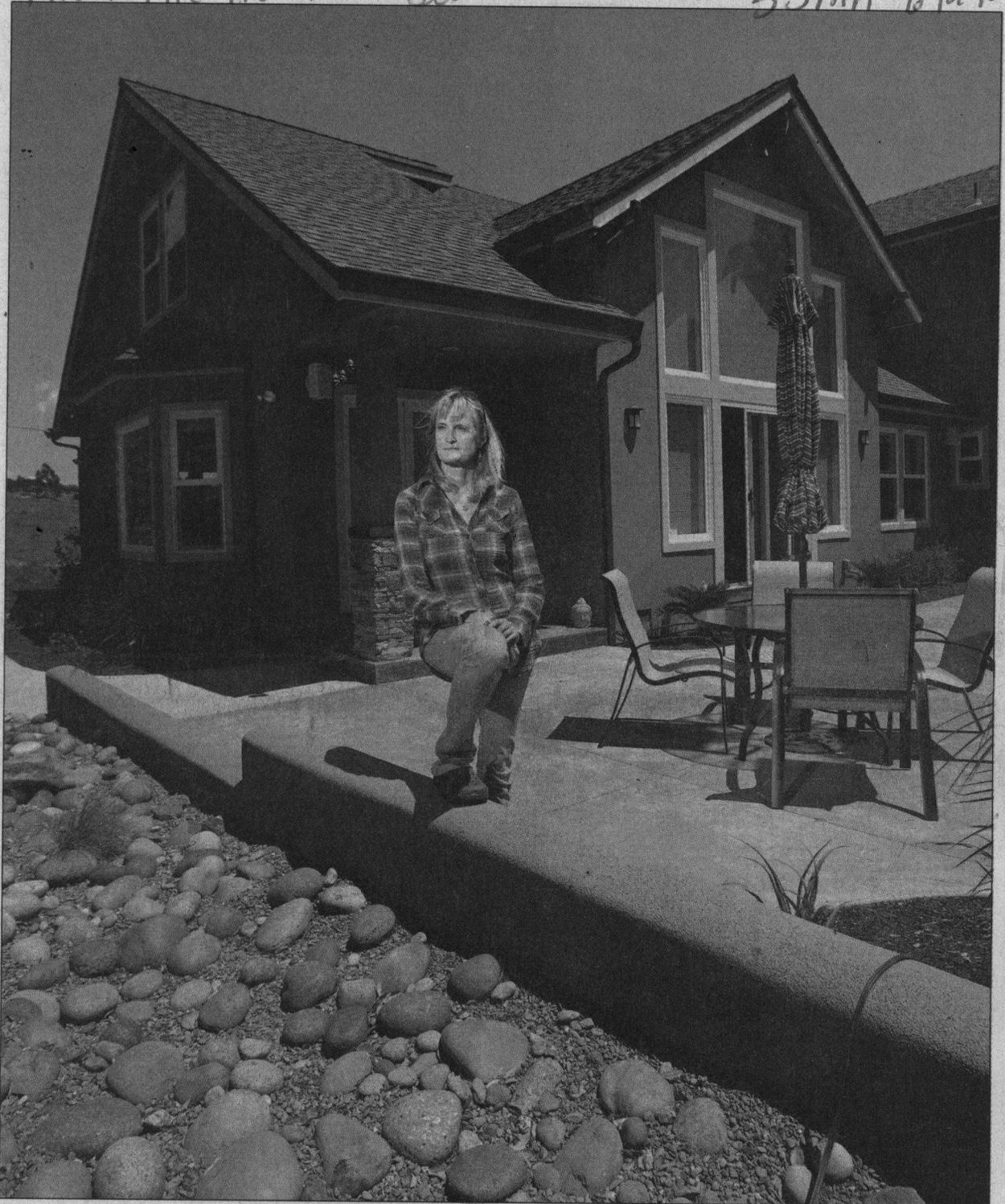


Rising from ashes

TWO YEARS AFTER TRABING FIRE: Burned out of their homes, neighbors battle insurers, county regulations and a tough housing market

Fire + Fire Prevention 2008

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PATRICK TEHAN/MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES: Diana Weatherholt stands outside her rebuilt home in Larkin Valley, northwest of Watsonville, above; her previous home was destroyed in the Trabling fire on June 20, 2008.

By Ken McLaughlin

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When the winds kicked up a week ago and the wail of fire engines drowned out the songbirds, Larkin Valley suddenly seemed ablaze again.

A small army of firefighters was descending on a grass fire, less than a mile away from Diana Weatherholt's home, almost two years after a horrifying blaze redefined this neighborhood of undulating pastures and picturesque white fences.

"By moving into a new home on the same property, I felt like I would be cheating on my old house."

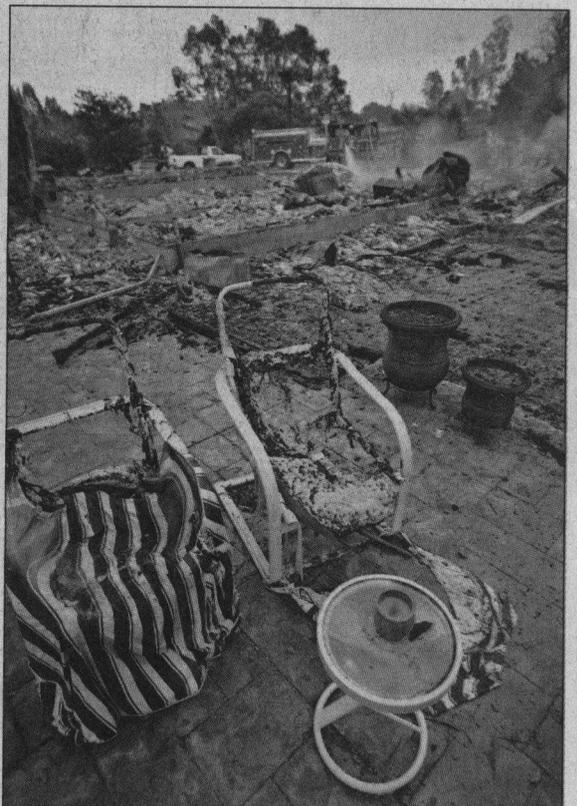
— Diana Weatherholt

"My heart went down to my toes," said Weatherholt, who like most of her neighbors was forced to rebuild after the fast-moving Trabling fire destroyed her home on June 20, 2008. She was still on crutches from knee surgery and lucky to escape the blaze alive.

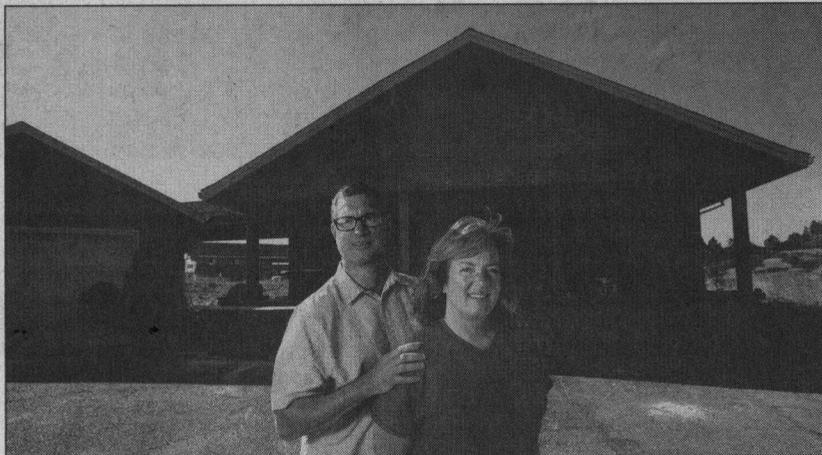
This time, firefighters would quickly douse the flames that kicked up such vivid memories in Larkin Valley. But understand-

ably, any sign of smoke has those who have returned to this community on edge.

Larkin Valley was one of dozens of California neighborhoods burned up in May and June of 2008, during one of the busiest fire seasons in decades. Ninety percent of the state's 1.4 million acres charred that year were in Northern California.



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“My parents are very gracious and giving, but there’s a certain dignity of having your own space. We’d just like to have normalcy again.”

— Robin Teague, who along with husband Tom, looks forward to moving into their rebuilt home this summer

Tom and Robin Teague, outside the house they are building in Larkin Valley near Watsonville, never thought rebuilding would take so long. Their previous house was destroyed in the 2008 Trabing fire, and they are rebuilding where the old one was.



PATRICK TEHAN/MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Robin Teague prepares to paint the interior of the house that she and her family hope to move back into this summer. They have been living with relatives.

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PATRICK TEHAN/MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Fire

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The Mercury News has been following some of the Larkin Valley families over the past two years. One thing is clear: The struggle to rebuild shows what a slow, painful process it is to put even an affluent neighborhood back together again.

Only three of the eight houses destroyed within view of Weatherholt's home are rebuilt — including hers — and home to a family again. One owner decided not to rebuild. Others are still on the slow march of the building process: getting a loan in an economy spiraling downward, the permits, the inspections, hiring the contractors, waiting out the rain, battling insurance companies.

Overall, 26 homes were destroyed in the Trabing fire, which started when a vehicle's faulty exhaust system ignited the dry grass along Highway 1. The blaze also destroyed 58 other structures and 44 cars, trucks and recreational vehicles. And it took the lives of about 50 horses, llamas, cats and dogs.

Tom Teague, an electrical engineer whose family members lost their cat and nearly everything they owned, said he has come to appreciate Ronald Reagan's old saw about the "nine most terrifying words" in the English language: "I'm from the government and I'm here to help."

Teague said negotiating the often-arcane rules of the notoriously nitpicky Santa Cruz County Planning Department was often mind-boggling, despite promises that the fire victims would be put on the "fast track."

When Tom and Robin Teague finally got their building permit about a year ago, they noticed a big red stamp informing them that "NO TRAILERS" would be allowed on the property during construction. But after they heeded the warning and moved out of two RVs on their lot, they were told by a building inspector: "I don't care if you have trailers. Just make sure you have a permit for them."

For Tom Teague, the timing of the fire couldn't have been worse.

He lost his job several weeks after the blaze, and he's been able to work only six months since.



Little remained of Tom and Robin Teague's home after the fire. For Tom Teague, the timing couldn't have been worse. He lost his job weeks later, and he's been able to work only six months since.

And he had to have both knees replaced.

Weatherholt also had two knee surgeries. And for three weeks after the fire, she couldn't even get her insurance company or her agent to send a copy of her policy, so she could know what was covered. She got it only when the office of Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner intervened.

Weatherholt, a 53-year-old X-ray technician, also had to hire a public insurance adjuster to help interpret the hundreds of byzantine insurance codes. "I needed a bigger shark than their shark," quipped Weatherholt, who's still waiting for her final check.

Still, because she's back in her home, Weatherholt is one of the luckier ones. She says her architect had a lot of experience cutting through the planning department's red tape, and she found a great contractor.

But she had mixed emotions when she moved into her new two-story stucco home on March 1.

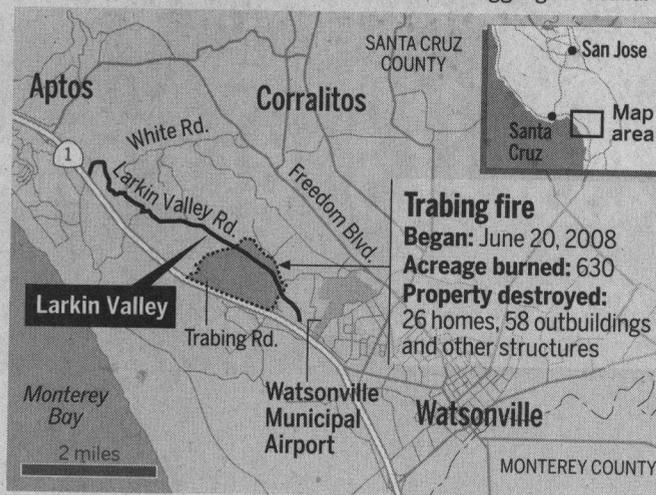
In the weeks after the fire, Weatherholt had decided that she'd rebuild the home but sell it.

"By moving into a new home on the same property, I felt like I would be cheating on my old house," she said.

"My old house was my dream house," she said. It was where

An anniversary to forget

Two years ago a ferocious fire, touched off by a vehicle's faulty exhaust system, swept through the idyllic Larkin Valley neighborhood northwest of Watsonville. Larkin Valley residents are still struggling to rebuild.



Source: Cal Fire

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she had raised her two girls, and it was filled with memories. Moving into a replacement house, she figured, could never be the same.

But Weatherholt had spent nearly a million dollars rebuilding. And because real estate prices have tumbled, the market value of her property is now only \$650,000, down from more than \$1 million at the time of the fire.

"I couldn't see giving the place away," she said. "It's my retirement."

But she gradually felt better about living in the new place when heavy winter rains spontaneously brought back most of her shrubs. And all the animals — the coyotes, woodpeckers, doves and even a great horned owl — returned too.

After three and a half months

in her new home, Weatherholt said, "it's starting to get its old feeling back. It will never be the way it was, but we'll make some new memories and new traditions."

Her two girls are grown up now. But 21-year-old Cassie, a student at UC Santa Cruz, lives with her part time. And mom and daughter have already picked out their Christmas tree, a small one made of driftwood to match their new "less is more" philosophy of life.

She and other neighbors, too, say the warm emotions they felt from the neighborhood after the fire will never go away.

Weatherholt said she was showered with clothes, furniture and offers of help from both friends and strangers. "I got eight coffee pots, and I don't even drink coffee," she said.

The Teagues, too, were overwhelmed when their pastor raised \$300 from a congregation in Bulgaria who had heard of the fire and their plight.

Still, Robin Teague never thought rebuilding would take so long. She had originally hoped to see her family together in a new home by last Thanksgiving. They're now hoping to move in sometime this summer.

The Teagues originally lived out of friends' home, before moving into the RVs. When they thought they had to move out of the trailers, they were taken in by Robin's parents, John and Barbara Hoover, whose Larkin Valley home survived when John battled the flames with a garden hose, a hoe and a shovel.

"My parents are very gracious and giving, but there's a certain dignity of having your own space," Robin Teague said. "We'd just like to have normalcy again."

Weatherholt understands. She says she often feels guilty being in her home while so many of her neighbors still wait.

"I now have the luxury of being able to pull weeds in my yard," she said.

And every day she is reminded of her fortune, reading the sign in her kitchen given to her by a friend:

"A rich person is not the one who has the most but the one who needs the least."

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