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New home puts Old Fire to rest

Family has open house

Mike Cruz, Staff Writer
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SAN BERNARDINO - An Old Fire survivor, Charlotte Crandall has seen the devastating effects caused by the tremendous blaze come nearly full circle.

From the paved walkway in front of her newly rebuilt home on Modesto Drive, Crandall recalled the October day in 2003 when the windswept wildfire jumped from palm tree to palm tree and reduced her home to ashes.

But while many other Del Rosa-area homeowners still have empty lots and have grown weary from haggling with insurance companies and contractors, Crandall has reached the light at the end of tunnel.

The spirited woman traversed from room to room of her three-bedroom home with its new slate floors, granite countertops and fresh coats of paint during an open house Saturday afternoon for family and friends, fellow survivors and those that made it all possible.

It's been a three-year journey - from losing her home, to living out of an RV, to moving back into her home in February.

"It has been a struggle," Crandall said. "It's been a real emotional rollercoaster."

Crandall credits her family for helping with the reconstruction. Her three sons, Travis, Michael and David, helped with planning and installing, she said from her new kitchen.

Her daughter, Lila Hayes, coordinated with the city and contractors and worked with her husband, an architect, on the planning and design.

"The whole family worked on it," Crandall said.

But the family also reached out to others through a disaster-recovery group to share knowledge, experiences and advice - a move they believe was key to successfully rebuilding.

"We were going to have a house here, no matter what happened," Hayes said.

The group would meet weekly and bring together players, such as the city, utility companies and contractors, to provide solid answers to questions. The best piece of advice, Hayes said, was not to give in to the insurance companies.

Sometimes, the meetings were completely invigorating, giving the members motivation to move on. Other times, they were absolutely draining, emotionally and physically.

Today, she can't imagine what the recovery would have been like without the group's help.

"Networking with other survivors can be the most valuable part of disaster recovery," Hayes said.

The family credits several key contributors with making her rebuilding possible: George and Patricia Kehrer of Community Assisting Recovery; her Los Angeles-based lawyers at Engstrom, Lipscom and Lack; and contractor Diamond Peaks Development.

The new home sits in stark contrast to a vacant lot just to the right where another house once stood. There's also another empty lot across the street, and still others in a varied states of rebuilding.

Not too far away, some lots still have burned-out chimneys standing alone and charred trees that serve as reminders of the

fire's devastation.

Other fire survivors, who attended the open house, had helpful advice for other homeowners in the city. After all, disasters can happen at any time, they said.

Take photographs of the whole house and everything in it as documentation, the survivors said. Keep an inventory of possessions and estimated values. And check homeowners' insurance to ensure adequate coverage in the event of a disaster.

Hayes says the newest project now in the Disaster Survivor Network, which aims to be a long-term repository of knowledge gained through the years.

It is located online at www.disastersurvivornetwork.com.