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From the Los Angeles Times

Lake View Terrace fire victims find comfort, solidarity at gathering

Residents who lost their homes at Sky Terrace Mobile Lodge in the Marek fire last month mourn their losses and talk about moving forward.
By Nathan Olivarez-Giles

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At noon Saturday, Dana Xedos found the one thing she'd been looking for in the month and a half since her home burned down in the Marek fire -- a gold ring that her late husband gave to her son.

As soon as Xedos saw the ring, she broke into tears.

A couple of hours earlier, Xedos' former neighbor Sally Garrett, 76, found the one thing she hoped for since losing everything to the fire -- a home.

The new mobile home Garrett agreed to buy is about six miles away from her old one, which was one of 43 destroyed at Sky Terrace Mobile Lodge in Lake View Terrace.

"It was my little slice of heaven on earth," Garrett said of the trailer she lived in for 22 years.

"It was just beautiful. On one side of the mountain you could see the green hills and trees, and on the other side, from my front porch, you could see the city lights from Burbank to Encino."

Together, Xedos and Garrett found something else Saturday afternoon -- comfort and solidarity as they gathered with 23 other former and current Sky Terrace residents at the park.

They sat on plastic chairs or made do with gray cinder blocks under a couple of trees spared by the flames.

After hearing from Venus Kitagawa-Stojic, who described herself as a celebrant with a humanist church, the residents spoke about what they had lost and their experiences since flames raced through Sky Terrace on Oct. 13.

"I feel guilty because my home was one of the 17 that didn't burn down," Nancy Owen told the crowd, her voice shaking.

The others quickly comforted Owen, 56, with hugs and comments. "It's not your fault," one said.

Garrett offered encouragement to those whose homes were destroyed.

"Every time God shuts a door in your face, he opens up a new one to bigger and better things," she said with her arms spread wide before the group. "Your homes will be replaced, and it will be OK."

Cornelius "Corny" Cole, 78, a retired animator, lost the trailer where he lived with his wife, Linda Zuchegna. Cole spoke of his frustration that no aid was being provided for Sky Terrace residents by the government.

"Oakridge is getting FEMA assistance and we're getting nothing," Cole said, referring to the mobile home park where 487 homes were destroyed in the Sayre fire this month.

"Everybody here needs some kind of help. It's like the homeless person who died down the hill here. He lost his life with his dog right beside him.

"We lost all our stuff, but nothing is more important than life. But it will take us a lot of time to rebuild our lives because we have nothing. The government forgot about us."

The ceremony ended with a moment of silence to pray for the homeless man and pets killed in the fire. None of the Sky Terrace residents knew the man's name, and officials have yet to identify him.

The 25 former and current residents then broke into smaller groups, embracing one another and pledging to do anything they could to help their friends.

People surrounded Marty Crocker, a carpenter, whose home was spared. He built a sifter of 2x4s and steel mesh to find belongings in the charred scraps of trailers.

"We've become a lot closer because of this fire," said Crocker, 45.

"It's funny, because we've always known each other, but now we have each other's cellphone numbers and we call each other all the time to see how we're doing."

But the group had no illusions of lifelong bonds.

"Most of us have a bond now that we didn't have before, but this ceremony is about moving on and restarting our lives," Zuchegna said.

Crocker agreed.

"These are my friends," he said. "I'll do anything I can to help. But eventually we'll find new homes and we'll slowly lose touch. That's part of life."

As the former residents drove away, returning to temporary housing with friends and family, Crocker returned to his sifter and Xedos went back to her debris-covered lot.

With her yellow rake, she continued looking for anything salvageable. She found a small, white sculpture of the Eiffel Tower.

"One thing that bugs me is the idea that what we lost isn't going to matter to anyone else because this is a trailer park," she said.

"We are not trailer trash. My neighbor was a city inspector and his wife was a nurse. I'm a librarian, and on the other side lived a pastor. We're people."

Olivarez-Giles is a Times staff writer.

nathan.olivarezgiles@latimes.com

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