

REBUILDING AFTER WILDFIRE

‘IT’S SO OVERWHELMING’

Couple gets jump-start on rebuilding Santiam Canyon home

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Editor’s note: This is part of an occasional series on life after the Santiam Canyon wildfires.

Brandon and Rechelle Kirk own riverside property in the Santiam Canyon and live in an idyllic neighborhood of about 30 residences, once surrounded by scenic wilderness and emerald green forests.

Most of their neighbors are retirees who nicknamed them “The kids.”

They’re in their 30s, with two dogs and two cats, but they fit right in after buying their first house in 2017. They met their neighbors’ children and grandchildren. They attended Fourth of July barbecues and participated in Christmas gift exchanges.

Not this Christmas, though.

Most of the homes in their neighborhood were destroyed by the Beachie Creek Fire, including the Kirks’ 900-square-foot cabin nestled on top of a riverbank along the Little North Santiam River.

The Kirks called it a cabin, but it was their primary residence. They also had a large shop that served as headquarters for Brandon’s safety consulting business.

The couple has the means and motivation to rebuild, but is disheartened to know some of their neighbors ultimately won’t. They’ve heard nearly half are planning to sell and move on, and not just because of the bureaucratic hurdles in their way.

“I think it’s more that people are still really grieving and sad, and they don’t know what to do,” Brandon said. “It’s still pretty fresh for a lot of people. They don’t even want to face it yet, and I get that.”

Four months have passed since the Labor Day fire wiped 700 homes from the canyon landscape, and the task of rebuilding is daunting, even for the Kirks.

Brandon and Rechelle are further along than most, but they took a break over the holidays from the cleanup and the planning. They had to.

“Man, it’s so overwhelming and exhausting,” Brandon said.

Starting to rebuild, with some help

Brandon and Rechelle are fortunate they have a place nearby to stay and that their insurance company has been quick to respond and fair with coverage.

They’re renting a cabin that was offered to them by a member of their church and one of Brandon’s former co-workers. It’s provided them and their pets much-needed stability, especially for Kora, their 4-year-old German shepherd.

Kora was so distressed by the fire and being displaced that their veterinarian prescribed “puppy Prozac.” She’s doing much better now and no longer needs the anxiety medication.

Both dogs — Alli also is a German shepherd, rescued by the Kirks after being abandoned last February at North Fork Park — love going to the property while Brandon and Rechelle work at the site. It’s still home to them, and they often whimper when they have to leave.

The feline members of the family, Littlefoot and Jax, have been less impacted by the upheaval.

The stress on Brandon and Rechelle has been lessened by having homeowner’s insurance with USAA, which serves U.S. military members and their spouses. Brandon was an EMT in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve from 2001 to 2005, stationed at Tillamook, where they’re both from.

USAA called him three days after the fire and assured him he was covered, depositing some money in the Kirks’ account within hours. About a week later, the company wrote the couple a big check.

Brandon gets emotional talking about how blown away he’s been by the company’s compassion, expediency and fairness, especially when he considers he has neighbors whose insurance claims have been denied.

“All of my neighbors are just getting the run-around, and we’re pretty much done,” he said. “It’s been a huge thing not weighing on my shoulders.”

Brandon has his own consulting business, Saws & Sprocket Safety. He does hazard assessment and mitigation plans for small to medium business owners who are implementing safety programs for their employees.

He lost an estimated \$80,000 in safety equipment in the fire and is seeking help from the Small Business Administration, through which he had business insurance.

Rechelle works as an administrative assistant for Oregon State Police. The OSP family has been a great support to her. Employees donated sick and vacation time, and an OSP sergeant started an online fundraising account with a



Brandon Kirk looks across the property where his home once stood near Lyons. The cabin sat along the Little North Santiam River and burned down in the Beachie Creek Fire. BRIAN HAYES/STATESMAN JOURNAL



Brandon and Rechelle Kirk lost their Santiam Canyon home during the Beachie Creek Fire. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

goal of \$5,000.

‘What are the chances’

The Kirks knew the potential fire danger when they bought the property from a family friend, but the allure of a little slice of heaven outweighed any possible danger.

Their neighborhood is surrounded by recreational destinations at every turn, less than two miles past Salmon Falls County Park and just south of the western edge of Opal Creek Wilderness.

But being remote does have tradeoffs. They never had cell service. Brandon would drive up the logging road behind their property and conduct business on his cell and laptop at 3,000 feet. They used satellite service for internet and TV. Everyone in the neighborhood was giddy last summer to learn they were finally getting DSL installed.

And then came the fires. “Being a safety consultant, I knew the only thing we had to worry about was wildfire, because we’re in a box canyon with one exit,” Brandon said. “But I thought, ‘What are the chances of that happening in Oregon?’”

No one predicted the firestorm that erupted on Labor Day, fueled by historic winds that were especially brutal along North Fork Road SE.

“Everyone who lives up here knows Elkhorn becomes a funnel for wind once it gets going,” Brandon said.

Rechelle and the cats evacuated in the afternoon to a friend’s at the base of the mountain on Highway 22, but not before helping some of their elderly neighbors pack up what they could. She packed more for them than herself.

“I literally had to drag her from our neighbors and say, ‘Hey, honey, we need to pack your own stuff,’” her husband said.

She eventually packed what was basically an overnight bag containing a few days worth of clothing, some jewelry and a Bible from college. She left wearing flip-flops and it wasn’t until later that she realized she hadn’t packed any shoes.

“We weren’t expecting to be gone very long,” Rechelle said. “We thought it was just temporary. They want us to get away so they can get control of the fire, and then we’ll be back in a few days.”

Brandon stayed behind with the dogs to tend to the property, trying to hose things down until the power went out at about 7 p.m. He loaded the dogs and headed down the mountain before being stopped in his tracks near the Elkhorn fire station, where there were several downed trees.

“I had three chainsaws,” he said, “but I can’t cut trees with fire chasing me.”

The flames were intense, and more trees were sure to fall. He turned around and left the back way. If he hadn’t been

familiar with the old logging service road that cuts behind the woods and exits by the Elkhorn Valley Golf Course, he would have been trapped.

Brandon joined Rechelle at their evacuation site at about 9:30 p.m., but they didn’t get much sleep. They were evacuated again at 1 a.m. because the fire was encroaching their friend’s house.

They wound up seeking shelter in Tillamook, where they grew up and Rechelle’s family still lives.

New trees, and a new well

The Kirks feel fortunate their property in the Elkhorn area was among the first wave for hazmat cleanup. The Environmental Protection Agency made sites on the North Santiam and Little North Santiam rivers, where hazardous waste could spill into waterways, a priority.

Brandon had already done some work on his own. A week after the fire, he laid hydroseed to help mitigate the erosion and runoff.

He rented a tractor, and it didn’t take long for them to fill two 40-yard containers with debris. They had heaping piles of rusted metal from their shop. They cut down blackened trees that couldn’t be saved and split them for firewood.

They planted 10 cypress trees on the riverbank side of their property and put battery Christmas lights on some to brighten the charred landscape. They’re also getting snowberry and tall Oregon grape plants in February from the North Santiam Watershed Council in Stayton.

The watershed has more than 20,000 small, native bare-root trees and shrubs available for landowners impacted by the Beachie Creek or Lionshead fires. The plants were ordered through the Bonneville Environmental Foundation and will be funded by an Arbor Day Foundation grant. Trees and shrubs are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

The Kirks still need to remove soil from the property, which will be disposed of at Coffin Butte Landfill. Coffin Butte requires fire debris, including soil, to be accompanied by documentation certifying it does not contain asbestos. The Kirks have had their property surveyed for asbestos, and none has been found.

Unlike other neighbors, their septic system and well survived the wildfires.

They paid for someone to inspect and pump their septic system and are awaiting Marion County’s approval. They’ve been told by the county there’s a 6-8 week backlog on final septic inspections, and a primary resident building permit can’t be issued prior to septic approval by the county.

Marion County building officials told the Statesman Journal its review on most septic permits takes less than two

weeks, but it may take 6-8 weeks from the time of permit application to installation.

“The county has three on-site wastewater specialists working in the canyon, as well as staff in our office that support the fieldwork,” Brandon Reich, Marion County Building and Planning Division Manager, said in an email.

He said property owners can apply for building and septic permits at the same time, and the county will work on both at the same time. As soon as the septic permit is issued, the building permit can be issued in many circumstances.

The Kirks hired someone to inspect their well, too, and it was recommended they replace it due to age and deterioration, which they did.

‘We’ve been through fire and rain’

“The kids” are further along in the rebuilding process than many wildfire victims. They know of people who still need help with cleanup and don’t know where to start.

“People need advocates to help them stand up for themselves and walk them through the processes,” Brandon said.

They’re offering help when they can, hooking people up with resources and vendors and guiding them through piles of paperwork.

“Whoever can help us, we’re a community,” Brandon said. “This is where we all need to pull together. We learned that during the ‘96 floods.”

They were in middle school at the time, and their hometown was especially hit hard. Rechelle’s family lost personal property in outbuildings, and floodwaters reached the doorstep of her childhood home before receding.

“We’ve been through fire and rain,” Brandon said, quoting the James Taylor song. “Honestly, after the first few days, that song was on repeat for me because it just rung so true, and it was such a hopeful and inspiring song for us to hear.”

On the flip side, it’s been demoralizing in the weeks and months since the fire to hear about incidents of theft in their neighborhood.

Neighbors have had chainsaws, wheelbarrows and other cleanup tools stolen from their property. Loggers have had batteries stolen from their heavy equipment. In one case, someone dug through a neighbor’s ashes and found a safe, dragged it into the woods, and beat it open with a sledgehammer. Luckily, the safe was empty.

Marion County Sheriff’s Office records show five thefts and one burglary reported in the five-mile area around the Elkhorn community from Sept. 7 through Jan. 17. During that same period the year before, one theft and one burglary was reported.

“Something we’ve continued to try and encourage residents in the area to do is report thefts or issues to the Sheriff’s Office as they occur,” Sgt. Jeremy Landers wrote in an email to the Statesman Journal. “Since the fires, we’ve continued to add additional patrols to the impacted areas to increase visible presence to help deter some of these very issues.”

The Kirks installed cameras on their property and just bought an RV for the site — they’ll need a permit for that, too — which they hope helps deter would-be thieves. Having a place to stay on-site will be convenient when they begin construction.

They hope that’s soon, but it’s out of their control.

The earliest they expect to get temporary power to the site is by the end of February. All they have now is a generator. Consumers Power Inc, an electric co-op, has told them it will install underground lines for the new system.

The Kirks will need two building permits, one for the house and one for the shop. Marion County is waiving building permit fees for approximately 470 primary homes that were destroyed or damaged in the Beachie Creek and Lionshead wildfires.

The county recommended they get a permit to build the shop first since it doesn’t require septic approval.

They’d like to finish the shop before spring, but winter weather could slow everything. They’ve only had a couple of dustings of snow so far, but they know what could happen. Last February, they had 21 inches at their place.

The goal is to complete construction of their house by next Christmas. They plan to rebuild on the same footprint, perhaps adding a second story.

They’ll do a lot of the work themselves and rely on some connections they have in the construction field. Rechelle’s brother is a contractor in Tillamook, and a retired OSP trooper who has a contractor business has offered to help.

“We have awesome people who’ve already reached out,” Brandon said. “It’ll be a huge blessing to know you can trust a contractor.”

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