

"IT'S GOING TO GET BETTER"

East Troublesome fire victims offer advice to those in L.A.

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SKY-HI NEWS

Nearly four years to the day since the East Troublesome fire burned through Grand County, Jeremy Krones moved back into his rebuilt home.

The wildfire, which sparked in October 2020, came at the worst time, Krones said.

"Had I not lost a house in a wildfire in the middle of the Colorado mountains, in the middle of winter, in the middle of a pandemic, in the middle of a supply chain catastrophe — like all of these factors were stacked against us," Krones recalled.

In the Los Angeles area, where more than 12,000 homes burned in January, displaced residents face similar challenges, drawing out the rebuilding process, which can take years.

Krones offered his perspective on loss and rebuilding as well as advice for moving forward post-fire.

Krones said he was a new homeowner at the time of East Troublesome, "so the things I didn't know were blown out of proportion." As he navigated the rebuilding process, he struggled with challenges from collecting fire insurance to finding support groups.

"There wasn't a trusted source telling me what to do," he said. "You can be self-sufficient, a loner up in the mountains — you know, doing everything by yourself — but you still need your hand held every so often. This was the kind of situation where I needed my hand held, and nobody was there."

No one to trust

As the flames of East Troublesome died out, Krones was receiving conflicting information about what to do next.

"I was hearing one thing from the state government. I was hearing another thing from the federal government, another thing from attorneys and from construction friends. I was hearing from all different angles," he said.

"It really got to a point where I didn't know who to trust, so I stopped trusting," he said.

Krones said he doesn't blame anyone for the difficulties he faced.

"You have to hold your own hand sometimes and work through it slowly, find your trusted confidants," he said.

Some people did step in to help, one being Grand County attorney Natascha O'Flaherty of Never Summer Law. Krones said she guided him through the complicated insurance process. He said he now has a better insurance company for his new home and feels more knowledgeable about insurance.

He considers himself lucky in this regard, because he has heard "a lot of horror stories" of other homeowners' experiences with insurance.

Looking back, Krones said he should have done things differently. He wouldn't have pushed people away, which he regrets. But now he can give advice to other wildfire victims, because he has come full circle.

"You are not alone," he said.

"You might feel really lonely. That is, I think, relatively unavoidable because you just went through a fairly unique event. However, you went through a unique event with so many other people."

He said victims should keep a checklist for everything they will need to do to get through the rebuilding process, including everything from numbers for insurance to "keeping track of their day-to-day lives."

"We all come through wildfires with trauma, and it's important to maintain a hold on what keeps you grounded," Krones added. "Trauma can affect your memory and your interactions with others, and a checklist is a good way to stay on track."

In addition, he said it's important to find connections and embrace when others reach out to help.

"I fully appreciate all my friends and family and neighbors who did reach out," he said. "I feel badly that, early on, I pushed them away because I couldn't think straight. There are a big handful who persisted and kept reaching out to me."

Krones also has advice for people who want to help the victims of the L.A. fires or other natural disasters. He said the first instinct might be to replace the things that victims have lost — but hold off.

Family honors lost parents

For Glenn Hileman, he lost more than stone, wood and steel in the East Troublesome fire. He also lost his parents, Lyle and Marylin Hileman.

They were in their 80s and died in their Grand Lake home, which was destroyed Oct. 21, 2020.

"Everyone's going to grieve when you lose your home and everything in it, and we lost our parents in this fire," Hileman said, adding that his faith that things would get better pulled him through the dark times.

Shortly before the fire, Lyle and Marylin had deeded their home to Glenn and his wife, Michelle. Hileman said he and his wife were fortunate that the property was not their primary residence, because his parents were living there.

After the fire, the couple sought to create a home not only for themselves but the whole Hileman family.

First, they built a covered pavilion for outdoor gatherings, something Marylin had dreamed of having on the property before she died.

Hileman said life returned to the burned landscape as family and friends visited the pavilion.

"Several summers we spent just in sleeping bags and an air mattress on the property because there was no home to stay in," he recalled. "Actually, those are good memories, not bad ones. ... You make the best of it."

Then they broke ground on the homesite. Hileman said the homebuilding helped him come to terms with the grief of losing his parents.

"For me, that was a form of therapy," he said. "It was a form of recovery that I really embraced."