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Fire erratic when choosing targets

Neighbors wonder why some homes lost, others spared

By Mark Sauer
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

October 27, 2007

In the wee hours of Monday, a tornado of fire played a cruel game of hopscotch amid the hilly sprawl of Rancho Bernardo, taking one house while sparing the place next door.

But nowhere was the firestorm's course more capricious than on side-by-side cul-de-sacs just east of Battle Mountain.

Of the seven houses on Hadden Hall Court, all but one survived.

Of the six houses on Canfield Place, all but one were destroyed.

Residents returning in the past two days already knew their fate, because TV crews had found a compelling visual in each cul-de-sac.

On devastated Canfield Place, it was the Rosenbergs' home, the only one left standing amid a sea of debris.

"You're watching it all happen on TV, then you realize it's you – they're showing your house!" Esther Rosenberg said. "It's like watching a horror movie and suddenly you're starring in it."

What stood out on Hadden Hall Court was the black 1935 Ford sedan that firefighters had pushed away from the Kutners' house, the only one taken by the flames.

"My son got a call from his buddy: 'Hey, dude, your house is on TV and it's burning,'" Rob Kutner said. "I didn't believe it. Then my phone rang – it's my sister in New York saying our house was burning on TV. That's how we found out."

Many of the residents have lived on the cul-de-sacs since they were



SEAN M. HAFEEY / Union-Tribune
Mary and Rob Kutner, who lost their home on Hadden Hall Court, looked at one of the only things left after the fire: a welcome sign. "Who knows? That's what it boils down to," Rob Kutner said. "It was just the luck of the draw."

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built around 1980. They pushed their baby strollers on the safe, circular streets, taught the kids how to ride their bikes and how to drive.

Now another marker has been etched into their lives. Events will forever be remembered as coming before or after the fire. And through the numbness of disbelief and whipsawing of emotions, one question will always remain: Why did one house go and others survive?

The Rosenbergs on Canfield Place have a pool and concrete patio; maybe that helped save their home.

The Kutners' home – which neighbors said was the nicest on Hadden Hall Court – has a similar backyard firebreak. Yet their house burned down, leaving a pile of firewood and a canvas patio umbrella untouched.

“Who knows? That's what it boils down to,” said Rob Kutner, examining his melted 1993 Harley-Davidson Electra Glide in the remnants of his garage. “It was just the luck of the draw.”

Equally at a loss for an explanation of why their house was saved while the five surrounding it were destroyed, Jonathan Rosenberg pointed to a small, rectangular case affixed to the right of his front door.

“I don't know what forces were at work when this thing came through. But I'm a Hebrew and that's a mezuzah by our door,” he said. Inside the case is the mezuzah, parchment on which verses from the Torah are written.

“Hey, you've gotta believe in something.”

Guilt and relief

The Rosenbergs face many challenges. Their house is filled with smoke and ash, and they may not be able to move back in for months. Even so, they lament that they were spared when others weren't.

“I feel so guilty,” Jonathan Rosenberg said as he hugged his neighbors two doors down, Marinos and Mary Garbis.

“Don't be,” Mary Garbis replied. “I'm just glad somebody was spared. It's nobody's fault.”

Among the handful of original owners, the Garbises lived on Canfield Place for 28 years, enjoying retirement there for nearly half of that time.



SEAN M. HAFEEY / Union-Tribune
Rod Melendez, whose house on Hadden Hall Court was spared, raked leaves blown off the trees surrounding his house. Neighbors were at a loss as to why only one home on the cul-de-sac burned and all the others were still standing.

"This is going to be a lousy way to spend the next two years," Marinos Garbis said, looking at the smoky debris on his corner lot.

Many of the houses on the adjoining cul-de-sacs were oriented to back patios and pools; many overlooked a canyon. Neighbors on each street knew each other, but they were separated from the other cul-de-sac by their own walls.

Now those walls are gone. So on Thursday afternoon, Rob and Deb Kutner – who lost their home on Hadden Hall Court – walked over and introduced themselves to the Garbises, who lost their home on Canfield Place.

"Hi, you must be the lady with the pomegranate tree," Kutner said, extending his hand.

Next door, Tony Yee, 73, contemplated the loss of a quarter-century of life and started to cry.

"If there was a pill I could take that would give me Alzheimer's, I'd take it right now," he said. "I just wish I could forget that all this has happened."

All that remained of the home where he and his wife, Monica, raised their two sons were the chimney and the blackened landscaping. "That was such a nice bonsai tree," Yee said with a rueful smile. "I loved looking at it."

Monica Yee said the couple spent the beautifully clear afternoon Sunday as they often did, taking a long drive. Now they were living in a Residence Inn.

"It's funny how it hits you in little ways," Monica Yee said. "We were out having dinner the other night and I said, 'Oh, good, leftovers; I'll take them home and put them in the fridge.' And then you remember.

"I think about how blessed we were before. We had all these things, a beautiful life, and we took it all for granted. Now we are grateful for every little thing."

Normalcy to heartache

Back on Hadden Hall Court, where Deb Kutner's house was the only one that burned, she mused about how she had spent her Sunday "using my great, brand-new Oreck floor machine buffing the kitchen and family-room floors. They were gorgeous!"

The Kutners are staying at a Residence Inn with their sons, ages 16 and 24, and four small dogs. They bought their home just two years ago, emigrating from upstate New York.

"We have blizzards in New York – we were only vaguely aware of the possibility of firestorms here," Deb Kutner said.

This week, she made a shopping trip to Macy's.

"I thought, 'What do I need?' Then I realized I need everything," she said. "Where do you start? It was so overwhelming that I walked right back out."

Two doors over, Chip Gaston was astounded that a toppled lawn ornament appeared to be the only thing amiss at his home.

Gaston and his wife, Judy, stood around Thursday afternoon, trading harrowing stories with neighbors of escaping the fiery beast in the early hours Monday.

For some reason, maybe a change in the wind or a whiff of smoke, Gaston woke up about 3 a.m. He quickly realized the fire had spread far west from its origins near Ramona and was about to invade his little circular corner of the world.

He raced door to door hollering out warnings around his cul-de-sac, then joined the instant exodus.

Back home now, Gaston is as confounded as anyone about the mirror image of damage and survival between the two circular streets.

"We're so sorry for the Kutners," he said. "They're such great people."

■ Staff members Danielle Cervantes and Denise Davidson contributed to this report.



SEAN M. HAFHEY / Union-Tribune

In Rancho Bernardo, the side-by-side cul-de-sacs of Canfield Place (left) and Hadden Hall Court suffered opposite fates, with all but one home on Canfield destroyed.

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By OpenMinded on 10/27/2007 at 6:02 a.m.

I'd like to know the percentages of homes burned that were "underwater" in their mortgages. A conflagration like this is a perfect time to dispose of property.

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By Wickedheart on 10/27/2007 at 10:47 a.m.

OpenMinded

I'm a wee bit confused as to why you think this would be good thing for anyone. These people still have a mortgage to pay and no place to live, not to mention no clothes except the ones on their back, etc, etc. The lender is going to require the home be rebuilt and most of the value is in the land not the structure too. So how does this benefit them?

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By aoprthewqpiufq on 10/27/2007 at 11:18 a.m.

This weekend will test the adaptability of the human species. First your nest is destroyed by fire, then you get rained on. I completely understand why we were a nomadic group in years gone by. Here comes winter, time to ski...

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