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Fire transforms homeowner

By Cathy Dausman



Joe and Betsy Magagna's home after the North Bay fire. Photos provided

"If I were 10 years younger, I'd be rebuilding," says former North Bay resident Betsy Magagna. It's summer and Magagna, dressed in shorts and a tee, looks happy, relaxed and tan sitting on the deck of her rental home on a Lamorinda hillside.

Less than a year ago Magagna and her husband Joe were feeling "very settled" in the Santa Rosa home they had purchased 10 years previously, having retired from Chicago to be near family. With a strong network of friends and activities, the couple anticipated living in that house for another 10 years.

Magagna filled her home with books, a collection of artwork 50 years in the making and furnishings from grandparents and in-laws - an 18th century mantle clock, Limoges and Haviland china, a 1915 wedding photo and Magagna's beloved grand piano. A photo taken several years ago shows 16 rose bushes in full bloom along the backyard fence and deer grazing on the golf course just beyond.

"We were very happy there," Magagna says. "The last thing on our mind was fire."

That all changed Oct. 8. Magagna called 911 that night to report smelling smoke; she was told it had drifted in from a fire to the south. But three hours later police were rushing house to house, frantically knocking on doors, compelling residents to leave - now.

Magagna grabbed her purse and iPad, asked her husband about his medications and the couple, dressed only in shoes, shorts and a T-shirt, drove away. "We had every intention of coming back" the next morning, Magagna said, but that didn't happen.

Nearly 3,000 Santa Rosa homes burned to the ground. The grand piano Magagna's parents gave her as a gift 60 years ago was reduced to ash.

"You don't appreciate what you have until you lose it," she said. The couple spent the remainder of the night at a Red Cross shelter, before driving to the East Bay to stay first with their daughter, then their son, and finally moving into a San Francisco condo for three months.

"We needed space to separate ourselves from the disaster," Magagna said, adding that events at first left them amazed, overwhelmed, exhausted and numb. The aftermath brought out both the best and the worst in people, Magagna said, but she counts herself lucky. The couple had family to live with and their home was insured. They found a beautifully updated single-story rental in Orinda whose owner Magagna calls "the nicest of ladies."

The owner offered some of her own furniture and the rest-knives, forks, plates, pots, pans, bedding and more- the Magagnas rented. "The last thing I wanted was to go shopping," Magagna admitted.

With the four plastic bins and file folders their daughter provided, the couple began reorganizing their lives. They spent hours with a claims adjustor and months just remembering what was in the house, down to collectible LEGOs they kept from their son's childhood. Magagna kept paper and pencil bedside, often waking up to record something else to include on their household inventory. They needed new birth and marriage certificates, passports and social security cards. Magagna had some household photos on her iPad but wishes she'd grabbed her computer flash drive.

Magagna says the experience has turned her into a minimalist, saying she buys something now only if she needs it. She owns two pairs of jeans and shorts and two T-shirts. That minimalist vision also drives their search to buy a Lamorinda home.

"A lot of us are on the fence" about whether to rebuild, Magagna says of her Santa Rosa neighbors and friends, and the couple has retained ownership of their lot, but watching her husband "come alive" at Christmas with their four little grandsons has left them strongly focused on buying a Lamorinda home and settling into this community.

The couple is searching for a good quality, single story home offering three-bedrooms, two baths and an

open kitchen floor plan in about 2,000 square feet of living space. Magagna hopes some eye-catching picture window views will serve as a replacement for the artwork now lost to fire. A view of Mt. Diablo, Magagna says, would nearly seal the deal.

The couple has refrained from buying furniture before they buy a house in order to simplify their move and insure the furniture suits the home and its surroundings. "I want to keep things as simple as I can," she says. Now sensitive to smoke, they also want a neighborhood with easy escape routes.

Twice the couple has presented offers on a home and twice they lost out in bidding wars. Another listing was under contract just 15 minutes into its first open house, Magagna said. She hopes their third offer will prove the charm. Betsy and Joe Magagna know they must be patient in their search.

"Be thankful for what you've got," Magagna said, and know that family "is most important."

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