

Rebuild: Up from the Ashes

Stories of Hope: Germaine

By Rick and Katie Larson

Germaine Savoie and her husband, Mike, moved more than a decade ago from the rat race of Western Washington to the beautiful and isolated canyons of Okanogan County. After years of hard work, their retirement home was established, gardens were planted, and a growing menagerie of pets kept them company.

But in the summer of 2015, Germaine lost nearly everything dear to her. Mike died suddenly in July, leaving Germaine alone on their 20-acre property. Just three weeks later, the Tunk Block wildfire tore through the canyon, destroying their home shortly after she fled the roaring flames. “I was scared,” Germaine said. “I grabbed pictures, papers and pets and got out.” She was blinded by the heavy smoke. “It looked like a war zone.”

Over the next several months, Germaine shuffled between temporary locations, trying to figure out how to recover from so much loss. Like many whose homes were destroyed by the wildfires, Germaine had no insurance. Her remote location, away from centralized fire suppression services, made it difficult to get insurance coverage. But she knew she wanted to resettle in the same place she and Mike bought together. “My life is here. This is my home,” Germaine said.

Thanks to the Okanogan Long Term Recovery Group and help from many others, she is now living on her property in a fifth-wheel trailer. She and her small menagerie of pets are making due in these small quarters while volunteers build her a new home next door. Throughout this process, OCLTRG Disaster Case Manager Jessica Martin makes sure Germaine has what she needs to get by.

Jessica said OCLTRG, a nonprofit founded shortly after the 2014 wildfire devastation, aims to meet the individual needs of disaster clients. “For Germaine, her long-term recovery is all about being back in her home.” Germaine is deeply grateful for the help she is receiving. “The kindness has been overwhelming,” she said. “All these people who have helped—I don’t even know where they all came from.”

Jessica and her team coordinate resources from a variety of charitable and faith-based organizations. Monetary donations and volunteer labor have helped rebuild 15 homes, with another 15 in process. But donations are still needed to help residents burned out of their homes in back-to-back fire seasons that destroyed more than 500,000 acres and 420 homes. The United Methodist Rebuild: Up from the Ashes projects seeks funding to raise about \$540,000—or about one house funded per district.

Germaine’s eyes light up as she shows visitors through her two-bedroom home that is nearly finished. The home, built with a metal roof and cement-board siding, will be insured and better able to withstand wildfires. Cold and snow are delaying the final touches, but Germaine believes volunteers will likely finish this spring. She can hardly wait. “The music is back in my head,” she said. “It’s great to feel happy again.”