

CHRISTCHURCH QUAKE A YEAR ON

Just as Christchurch was finding its feet after the devastating September earthquake, it was jolted by the deadly quake in February. A year after the first big shake, **Amanda Cropp** chronicles her own family's roller-coaster ride and catches up with fellow residents whose stories of tenacity and strength featured in our January issue.

A YEAR ON FROM the first major earthquake that shook Canterbury on 4 September last year, life is still far from normal for many Christchurch residents. By a miracle of timing there were no deaths in the violent 7.1-magnitude 4.35am shake and it turned out to be a practice run for February 22 when an even more devastating quake killed 181 people, crippled the CBD and wrecked thousands more homes.

On June 13 the region suffered two more large quakes in less than two hours, and in late August heavy snow brought the second coldest temperatures since 1918.

Outsiders describe Cantabrians as brave, stoic and resilient. We are all of those things, but after a year of being shaken up on a regular basis, we have every reason to feel battle weary. Just when the ground seemed to have settled down and we began to relax, it started heaving again.

Things most city dwellers take for granted, such as fresh water, electricity and flushable toilets, we have learned to do without. In the eastern suburbs flat roads are a longed-for luxury as we continue to navigate streets full of bumps, dips and potholes.

Thousands fled the city; most temporarily, some for good. For those who stayed, especially in the eastern suburbs, leisure activities are limited.

Two major shopping malls have been closed for months. Hundreds of CBD shops, bars and restaurants are still shut as are six cinemas, two large public swimming pools, the art gallery, the Arts Centre, town hall, convention centre, AMI stadium, central library and five suburban libraries.

So many familiar landmarks have gone that parts of the city feel like a foreign country. It's disconcerting driving down once-familiar streets, seeing empty sections and trying to remember what buildings used to be there. ➤

Piles of debris, like this one in Cathedral Square, are still a familiar sight in Christchurch, along with abandoned buildings, road closures, portals and liquefaction.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARTY MELVILLE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



“My husband is gutted watching 27 years worth of renovations torn apart, but at least we will be safe and our two sons can return to their bedrooms from the sunroom floor.”

Constant change became the norm but amid all the chaos there are signs of a revival as the long rebuilding process begins. Volunteers are turning empty sections cleared of rubble into temporary parks with art works brightening dull corners. A temporary entertainment centre in Hagley Park will host the city's arts festival and a fan zone for Rugby World Cup enthusiasts denied the chance to watch games in Christchurch.

By Cup and Show Week in November, an annual highlight of the Canterbury social calendar, glass-sided shipping containers will house pop-up shops on vacant sites in the city mall, finally reopening a tiny section of the CBD where demolitions are gathering pace.

Suburban communities too are mapping out their futures, including seaside Sumner where I live. Spared the horrendous liquefaction that inundated other eastern suburbs, we instead faced the danger of falling boulders dislodged by aftershocks. In June whole cliff faces collapsed and hundreds of shipping containers line our streets to provide protection from falling rocks.

By the time demolitions are completed we'll have lost the community centre, RSA, surf club and up to 10 business premises in our small village.

Through all this, the response from a population of just under 4000 has been truly amazing. A welfare hub set up to help people in the wake of the February quake led to a series of public meetings where several hundred residents signed up to help revitalise our

battered suburb. Groups were formed to redesign the commercial area, landscape vacant building sites, replant the sand dunes and to create giant posters to cover the ugly rows of shipping containers. A new website keeps residents informed of developments and a network of street co-ordinators is training to swing into action in future emergencies.

We try to ignore niggling concerns about the risk of further earthquakes and get on with our lives. That's not easy when the pace of progress is agonisingly slow, and getting action from the Earthquake Commission and insurance companies is so often a long and stressful battle.

I speak from experience. It took months to get the okay for emergency work on three large internal chimneys in our home as we nervously monitored cracks that widened with each large aftershock. As I write, builders are finally taking the chimneys down to floor level, a process affecting five rooms and requiring the removal of about 12 tonnes of bricks. My husband is gutted watching 27 years worth of renovations torn apart, but at least we will be safe and our two teenage sons can return to their bedrooms instead of bunking down on the sunroom floor.

With their school severely damaged our teenage boys joined 11,057 students forced to share campuses and attend classes in shifts. They spend two hours a day commuting and arrive home at 7pm, a timetable that has cut out after-school activities and turned family life upside down.

Despite the trials of using a portaloos for “solids” in mid-winter, we count ourselves lucky compared to those living in the “red zone” where 5100 homes will be abandoned due to the severity of land damage.

The four Christchurch families whose post-quake stories appeared in the January issue of The Australian Women's Weekly are all “red-zoners” and although their futures remain uncertain, they are all attempting to move on. We caught up with them.



Lyn and Robert Campbell.

“We're still walking up and down hill, no carpet, no pictures on the wall. We've been camping since September and we can't do this any more.”

THE CAMPBELLS

LYN AND ROBERT CAMPBELL decided to accept Government compensation for their home in Featherston Street, Kairaki Beach, and have an offer in on a much smaller house less than a kilometre away.

Lyn says some younger families who had homes that suffered little structural damage plan to fight the red zoning of their properties, but at the age of 62 that's not an option for her and Robert. “We feel like the rats deserting the sinking ship ... but we need out for our sanity.”

The Campbells spent five and a half months living in their garage, scouring their sewage-contaminated cottage until it was liveable, but Lyn says the house is freezing and windblown silt makes it impossible to keep clean.

“We're still walking up and down hill, no carpets, no pictures on the walls. We've been camping since

September and we can't do this any more. (Last school) holidays was the first time I'd had a grandchild to visit since September because we don't have much to offer them at the moment.”

Robert works as a storeman and driver for a moving company, a job that has taken him inside the CBD cordon to retrieve papers for a business on the seventh floor of a high-rise building.

He says the silence in the inner city is strange. “The only thing you hear is the noise of generators.”

With so much ruin around him it was hard not to think about the risk of further quakes. “It's the uncertainty of ‘what if?’ But hey, if your number is up, it's up and you can get knocked over on a pedestrian crossing. It's a bit unnerving but you put it to the back of your mind.”

Lyn works in a Rangiora jeweller's shop where she sometimes feels as much a counsellor as a salesperson. “Eighty-five per cent of (customers)

need to talk about the earthquakes. We've had people break down in the shop,” she says.

In February Lyn and Robert cooked 52 meals for a chopper service flying emergency supplies into quake-hit eastern suburbs, and Lyn regularly makes door-to-door calls as part of a scheme to identify people needing post-quake support in the Waimakariri area. “I went to the bottom for a while, then I needed to pick myself up and I've always been a doer so it was a positive thing for me.”

Sad as they are to leave Kairaki Beach, Lyn says it helps to see the development of parking and picnic facilities nearby.

“It will be a great recreation area. If you can't live here, you'll be able to bring your kids and have picnics in a much better environment, so there's always good that comes out of bad.”

STATING THE FACTS

- More than 8440 quakes since September 2010 have created around 8 million tonnes of rubble and more than 580,000 tonnes of silt and sand.
- The Earthquake Commission has received nearly 370,000 claims.
- 6000 homes with severe land damage will be abandoned and almost half the central business district (900 buildings) may be demolished.
- 45,000 chemical toilets and 2900 portaloos were distributed in the city but it's hoped all households will have flushable toilets by the end of August.
- Almost 9000 secondary school students are still attending classes in shifts on shared campuses.
- Severe snowstorms on 25 July and 15 August left snow lying up to 30cm deep and minimum temperatures dropping to below zero in many places.

Pictured clockwise, from top: Construction workers built a brace to hold the damaged Christchurch Cathedral; Sumner residents using this portaloos after the August snowstorm had to bundle up warm; owners of a damaged Sydenham dairy temporarily operated out of a shipping container.

PHOTOGRAPHY: HANNAH JOHNSTON/GETTY IMAGES; THE PRESS AND AMANDA CROPP.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GUY FREDERICK.



The Southorn family.

“Lucy and Emma came home with beanies from a North Island knitting group. Oliver went out to get the mail and someone handed him a quilt and said, ‘This is for your family.’”

THE SOUTHORNS

WHEN I REVISIT LEE SOUTHORN she’s wearing a Love Christchurch pendant given to her by her sister-in-law in Wellington. “She gave one to me and to my other sister in Christchurch and said, ‘Let’s all wear them and we’ll be thinking of each other.’”

In the Southorns’ Dallington Tce, close to the Avon River, eight of the 10 houses are empty and Lee is keen to leave before the bulldozers move in. “I don’t want the kids seeing that, so we need to make plans and go.”

Lee loves older character houses, but accepts their next home will be a new one built by builder husband Paul. “We’ll take on whatever we need to borrow to

do that because we just need to move on with our kids and get on with our lives.”

The Southorns’ three children have proved amazingly resilient in the face of major disruptions over the past year.

Oliver, 13, does the morning shift with a 7.45am start at St Bedes College which shares its campus with sister school Marian College.

Emma, 11, and Lucy, eight, attend St Paul’s Catholic School which has moved three times in the past year due to quake damage. Lee and other parents organised regular tutorials while the kids were off school following the February quake and she says the children are doing fine academically.

But the impact of the quakes shows up in little ways, such as Lucy’s desire for a two-storeyed house. “When I asked her why she said, ‘because they have stairs in them and under them is a safe place in an aftershock.’”

The family sticks together more and when they do separate, there’s always a plan in place to collect the children in the event of another major shake.

Lee shops online these days, won’t use parking buildings and avoids malls. “I struggle to do malls; I feel really unwell, dizzy and nauseous. And I really watch where I park on the road, I don’t park by large lamp posts; there’s just that general elevated awareness of possible risks.”

When she took the children to Auckland for a break after the February quake they forgot to flush the toilets because they were so used to pumping a chemical loo, something Paul has the chore of emptying. “He has the toughest stomach and the worst sense of smell.”

Lee says the kindness of complete strangers has really boosted family morale during a difficult time.

After the red zone announcement staff and students from St Bedes delivered home baking. “I cried and cried; that’s goose-bump-down-your-back kindness. Lucy and Emma came home from school with knitted beanies from a North Island knitting group with little notes attached saying, ‘Thinking of you.’”

“Oliver went out to get the mail and someone handed him a quilt and said, ‘This is for your family.’ It’s the little gestures that mean so much.”

ELSIE WALKINSHAW

AFTER THE SEPTEMBER QUAKE

Elsie Walkinsaw, 73, knew her home, one of nine pensioner units in New Brighton Road, would be pulled down, but the February quake ruled out plans to remediate the land and rebuild.

Elsie says ruefully she had enjoyed the return of her flush toilet for just three days when the June quakes once again forced a return to a chemical loo.

Residents in her complex work together in pairs to empty their toilets at the nearest street sump, now the Christchurch equivalent of the parish pump, where people meet and swap loo-cleaning tips.

“There was a time before September when anything connected with toilets was private but nowadays it’s a topic of conversation: ‘Where do you go?’ ‘How often?’ Everybody knows everybody’s business, if you’ll excuse the pun.”

In Elsie’s sitting room the grey mark on the carpet is evidence of a third dose of liquefaction and the reserve over her fence which led to a lovely riverside walkway is thick with silt, churned up by dozers building stopbanks to prevent flooding from high tides.

But Elsie isn’t one to sit around moping. She worked part time as



Elsie Walkinsaw.

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a budget advisor for the Supergrans organisation, and within two weeks of the February quake she was back helping hard-hit families.

“When you pick them up you can see they’re totally lost and so stressed out. You walk with them as you show them how to rebuild their lives step by step, you advocate for them to get their lives back on track, and you see the outcome when they have another home, they have furniture and they have assistance from the Red Cross and the Salvation Army. You see the change in them and it’s absolutely awesome.”

There has been plenty of disruption to Elsie’s life too. Shopping is difficult with so many stores closed or demolished, her exercise classes have ceased and driving is a nightmare. “You have to plan your route. You know your way to a place but so often there are signs saying: road closed, floods or detours.”

As a new migrant from the UK she vividly remembers arriving in Lyttelton by boat, and mourns the loss of the port town’s historic buildings.

But she is still unfailingly optimistic. “This is not going to beat me; I intend to enjoy my life again.” When there were reports of a 30 per cent chance of another big shake, Elsie chose to interpret it as a 70 per cent chance there wouldn’t be one. “Your brain is like a filing cabinet with a positive drawer and a negative one. You choose how you do the filing. If you put something in the negative one, it will be stuck in your head.”

Elsie’s offer on a townhouse in Papanui has been accepted and she is on her way out of the red zone at last.

“We’re never going to have Christchurch as it was but if we do it right, we’re going to have a pretty unique city. Now is our time to remove the mistakes and make it right and I think we can have a good tomorrow.”

THE POCKSONS

WHEN THE POCKSON FAMILY’S

wheelbarrow disappeared after Student Army volunteers shovelled silt in their street, Lavina Pockson contacted Army leader Sam Johnson. He gave them a brand new wheelbarrow and arranged for them to spend a week at his parents’ farm cottage. “It’s quite uplifting if someone gives you help, especially if they don’t even know you.”

Lavina, husband Jeff and their three children, Kaelani, six, Eva, three, and Charlie, one, moved out of their old Bexley home in February after it was again affected by liquefaction. “It was heaps worse. It [the silt] was so high outside the house that if you stood on it, you could just touch the guttering.”

They lost about \$25,000 worth of belongings and although insurance will cover their rent until October, Lavina estimates they will have to increase their mortgage by \$50,000 to rebuild.

“People say you’re young and you’ll recover and that’s true, we’re in a better position than someone who is retired ... but financially it’s pretty tough when you’re down to one and a bit incomes with three kids to feed and support. It has got me thinking, ‘Do I need to go back to work full time?’”

The Pocksons considered moving to Cambridge where they have close friends, but ruled that out. “It comes down to jobs and both my parents have serious health issues. If anything happened while I was away, I’d never forgive myself.”

When the February quake struck Lavina had just visited her critically ill father in Christchurch Hospital, and after collecting the two younger children from the Hagley childcare centre where she works part time, it took five hours to be reunited with Jeff and Kaelani.

“You could see the dust rising and hear all the car alarms; I remember it being so, so noisy and it was awful to see panicky people. There was this



The Pockson family.

woman just sobbing in her car and I wanted to stop and do something.”

Lavina admits the quakes have taken their toll. “I don’t like being scared all the time, going to bed every night and not knowing what’s going to happen. Driving to work, with every kilometre I drive I feel more nervous that I’m further away from Kaelani at South Brighton, knowing that it took five hours to get all the way there through the liquefaction and past upturned cars.”

Kaelani and Eva have been affected too and are still sleeping in their parents’ bedroom. “You get them settled then there’s another one [big quake] and it just confirms their worst fears. Kaelani is six and she hasn’t been to the toilet on her own since February.”

Family outings are fewer with the nearby Palms mall closed for six months and the QE2 Park pools out of action permanently. Lavina says she is looking forward to the day when quakes do not dominate conversation. “I miss the old days when we talked about other things.”

By this time next year the Pocksons hope to be living in a new house at Pegasus, just north of Christchurch. “The icing on the cake would be that the land was staying still and people were feeling confident and less scared.” ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: GUY FREDERICK