



Canterbury landmark the Deans family homestead was destroyed in the quake. Right: Lucy, Emma and Oliver Southorn in the playground of their school, which was damaged beyond repair.



AFTER THE QUAKE

It might not make national headlines much any more, but the legacy of the earthquake that devastated parts of Christchurch on 4 September 2010 will be with Cantabrians for years to come. Amanda Cropp talks to fellow residents grappling with the task of rebuilding their homes and lives.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GUY FREDERICK

GETTY IMAGES

Forty seconds seems an eternity when it feels as though a giant hand has picked up your house and is shaking it like a rattle.

The initial 7.1 magnitude quake was bad enough, but the thousands of aftershocks that followed were totally unnerving and months on from the “big one” any unexpected rumbling noise or sudden vibration was enough to spark a surge of adrenaline.

Leaving town wasn’t necessarily an antidote either: witness the man who startled colleagues at a presentation in Auckland when he stopped mid-sentence, white as a ghost, eyes bulging after mistaking the vibration from a passing truck for an earthquake.

That no one was killed remains a miracle and the apparently random nature of the damage is hard to fathom. Houses with no structural damage were wrecked inside as china was hurled off shelves, pantry contents were emptied on to floors and paintings shaken off walls.

Yet in other houses with cracked foundations, downed chimneys and crumbling brick work, the most fragile of ornaments didn’t shift a millimetre. ➤

More than 155,000 claims have been lodged with the Earthquake Commission (EQC) and with up to 5000 homes needing a complete rebuild, the fix-up phase has a long way to run.

Day-glo vests, once a fashion crime perpetrated only by safety conscious cyclists, road workers and emergency service personnel, have become a welcome sight. They signal a visit from insurance and EQC assessors with the power to make decisions about if and when broken homes will be repaired or rebuilt.

Christchurch remains a city divided into those with earthquake damage and those who got off scot-free.

The “have-nots” have much to be thankful for. Other than suffering the inconvenience of dodging safety fencing around unstable buildings or missing favourite shops and cafés that have been rendered off limits, their lives quickly returned to normal.

Those whose homes and workplaces suffered major damage are still ploughing their way through EQC and insurance claims, trying to come to terms with their dramatically changed circumstances and an uncertain future.

The resilience of Cantabrians in the wake of the region’s costliest natural disaster earned high praise from the rest of the country.

Take the rural mum with three small children who bought a second-hand caravan on Trade Me for \$5000 so the family could remain on their property to care for stock.

Her insurance cover provided for emergency accommodation but because the caravan was not a motel, the insurance company refused to pay for it. Through all this her husband was lying in hospital under threat of having his arm amputated after receiving a serious electrical burn while trying to weatherproof their wrecked home.

Such families don’t make a fuss, preferring to quietly “get on with things” and like the other quake survivors interviewed for this story, they insist there are plenty of others worse off than them.

A NEW WAY OF LIFE

Lucy Southorn’s drawing of the earthquake has thick black squiggles illustrating the way it shook her Dallington home, and just as she is explaining this, there is another sizeable aftershock.

The seven-year-old scoots into her mum Lee’s arms for a reassuring cuddle while her 12-year-old brother Oliver calmly checks the GeoNet website, announcing a short time later that the quake registered a respectable magnitude 4.8.

I’d just dropped my teenage son at a birthday party nearby so I texted him asking, “Are you okay?” To which he replied, “No I’m dead,” followed by, “Yes I’m fine.” We all agree that black humour is an excellent remedy for post-quake stress.

Paul Southorn is a builder and Lee does the company books. Despite severe earthquake damage to the suburb and uncertainty surrounding the family’s future, he is confident they will cope. “We’ll be better, stronger people for it; it’s character building.”

The earthquake has undone 12 years worth of recently completed renovations on the Southorn’s weatherboard bungalow, leaving cracks in the driveway, walls and floors, and twisting the framework so most of the windows don’t open.

Unlike many of the surrounding brick houses earmarked for demolition, the damage to the Southorn’s home is probably fixable, but in the meantime vibrations from passing buses make the whole house shake disconcertingly.

In order to stabilise the land there are plans to install protective underground “dams” along the nearby Avon River and Lee worries that the excavations will do further damage to the already weakened buildings.

She loves the area, but admits that if they have to leave for several years while remedial work is carried out, they might not return.

“I’m grieving for a lifestyle that I don’t know if we will ever get back. If you

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bury someone close to you, people get that. But there are so many people in Christchurch who have no concept of the enormity of how that 40-second quake has changed our life path.”

Buildings are only part of the story; other aspects of family life have changed markedly. The brick tower of St Paul’s Church in Gayhurst Road was a local landmark and Lucy, Oliver and their 10-year-old sister Emma attended the Catholic school there.

Two weeks before the earthquake parish priest Father Miles O’Malley died suddenly and his funeral took place just days before the earthquake destroyed the church and the school.

Lee says she cried when she saw the church. “We went inside and it was like an out-of-body experience. The pews were piled one and a half metres high. I just felt numb.”

Revisiting the school is painful. Emma’s old classroom sports a wide, jagged crack in the brick work and peering through the window she comments on how strangely empty it looks without furniture. “Wow, it’s so bare.”

The quake created terraces 40cm high in the playground and Lucy says just being there makes her feel sad.

As a member of the school board of trustees Lee was involved in finding alternative accommodation for the 290 pupils who spent a week having lessons in a disused special school, before moving to prefab classrooms at Cathedral College in the inner city.

Instead of a two-minute walk to school, the Southorn children have to leave home 30 minutes earlier to catch a bus across town. Lee says that has changed the whole dynamics of the school because parents can’t just pop in to see a teacher, or catch up with other families.

But she is keen to put the earthquake behind them and look to the future. “It’s a huge opportunity to build a new, state-of-the-art Catholic school.”

As for all those portalos dotting the streets she concedes they do have their advantages: at least she is never caught short while out walking the dog. ►



The Southorn family’s home is repairable, but their church and the children’s school have been condemned.

“WE’LL PROBABLY END UP DOING A LOT OF THE WORK OURSELVES, BUT I’M NOT SURE WE HAVE THE ENERGY TO DO IT ALL AGAIN; WE’RE RUNNING OUT OF PUFF.”



Lyn and Robert are living in their garage and are worried they’ll still be there in winter.

PARADISE LOST

Since their cosy Kairaki Beach cottage was classed as uninhabitable, Lyn and Robert Campbell have lived in their garage which is jam-packed with bedding, clothing, furniture and most of the cabinetry from their near-new kitchen.

The day I drop by the couple in their early 60s are rehousing their pet goldfish from emergency accommodation in an outdoor bath tub to their newly reinstated pond.

In the earthquake a sand volcano erupted in the goldfish pond, but they managed to rescue half a dozen fish that survived in water-filled folds of the polythene liner.

A quirky covered barbecue area, complete with a mounted stag’s head and a stuffed wallaby, has become the outdoor living room and kitchen. With the oven and microwave both smashed, Lyn says cooking options are limited and she misses being able to do baking. “We’re down to a gas ring, a crock pot,

the sandwich press and a deep fryer.” Indoors another “volcano” has created a large mound in the dining room lino and Robert jokes that he’s a bit sick of “mountaineering” to get to the kitchen.

A thorough scouring with litres of bleach has failed to completely eradicate the smell of sewage-contaminated silt, hence the decision to sleep in the garage.

Robert’s quad bike is parked in the lounge beside the piano, which usually takes four people to shift but was shunted half a metre out from the wall by the earthquake, scattering treasured photos of Lyn’s grandchildren.

Living without a proper toilet is not a big deal for these avid campers, who now rely on a portaloos at the front gate. Determined to raise a smile among the few remaining residents in the devastated beach community, Lyn decorated it with camouflage netting and cardboard ducks, dubbing it the “poo duck inn”.

She says they opted to live in the garage rather than pay for rental accommodation

because they’d struggle to find a landlord prepared to accept their two dogs and three cats, and who could provide grazing for Robert’s Irish hunter show horse.

“We’re here because of the animals. We don’t have to explain to children why they can’t have their toys, why it’s difficult to cook and why it’s difficult to have a shower with hardly any water.”

That said, they don’t relish spending the winter in the uninsulated garage and hope their house is fixed well before then.

Robert is unemployed and waiting for neck surgery, and Lyn, who works full-time in a Rangiora jewellery shop, says the financial fallout from the quake is worrying.

EQC offered them \$7000 to re-pile their house, a sum Lyn has rejected as completely inadequate. A builder who inspected the property recommended a complete rebuild and at the time of writing the issue remained unresolved.

Lyn says they can’t afford to increase their mortgage. “We don’t want to take

on more debt. We’ll probably end up doing a lot of the [renovation] work ourselves, but I’m not sure we have the energy to do it all again; we’re running out of puff.”

Despite the loss of a few favourite ornaments and being left with a house that “wanders all over the place”, Lyn says they have a lot to be thankful for. “Possessions don’t matter a jot, we still have each other. We’re not hard done by when you look at other places.”

GUTSY GRANNY

Three years ago widow Elsie Walkinshaw moved into one of nine brand new pensioner cottages in Burwood, expecting to see out her days there.

The 72-year-old says the Riverside Villas development might look fine, but the land underneath needs stabilising so the whole lot will be demolished. “You walk up the driveway and see this really nice complex. It looks normal but in reality it’s falling apart.”

Elsie is one of the lucky ones. Apart from a few cracks in the walls, the most visible damage to her unit is the 10 centimetre gap between the ranch sliders and outdoor patio. “The only thing I had broken was two drinking glasses worth \$6,” she says.

Others were less fortunate. Next door silt poured through the floor of the shower and the 90-year-old owner moved to a rest home. Another couple with a huge crack through the middle of their house moved back to Invercargill.

When a plumber used a water blaster to remove silt from the badly damaged sewers, he blew Elsie’s neighbour’s toilet to pieces, and for months she slept over at her daughter’s place rather than venture out to a portaloos at night.

Elsie describes the EQC and insurance claims process as “a nightmare” and she has become the spokesperson for the other home owners, working her way through mountains of paperwork and battling with tradesmen over repairs to the shattered sewer line under the development’s driveway.

“I’m the world’s biggest optimist. My attitude is ‘get real and get on with it’. Every time we get another earthquake I think ‘not again’, but I’m okay – I’m

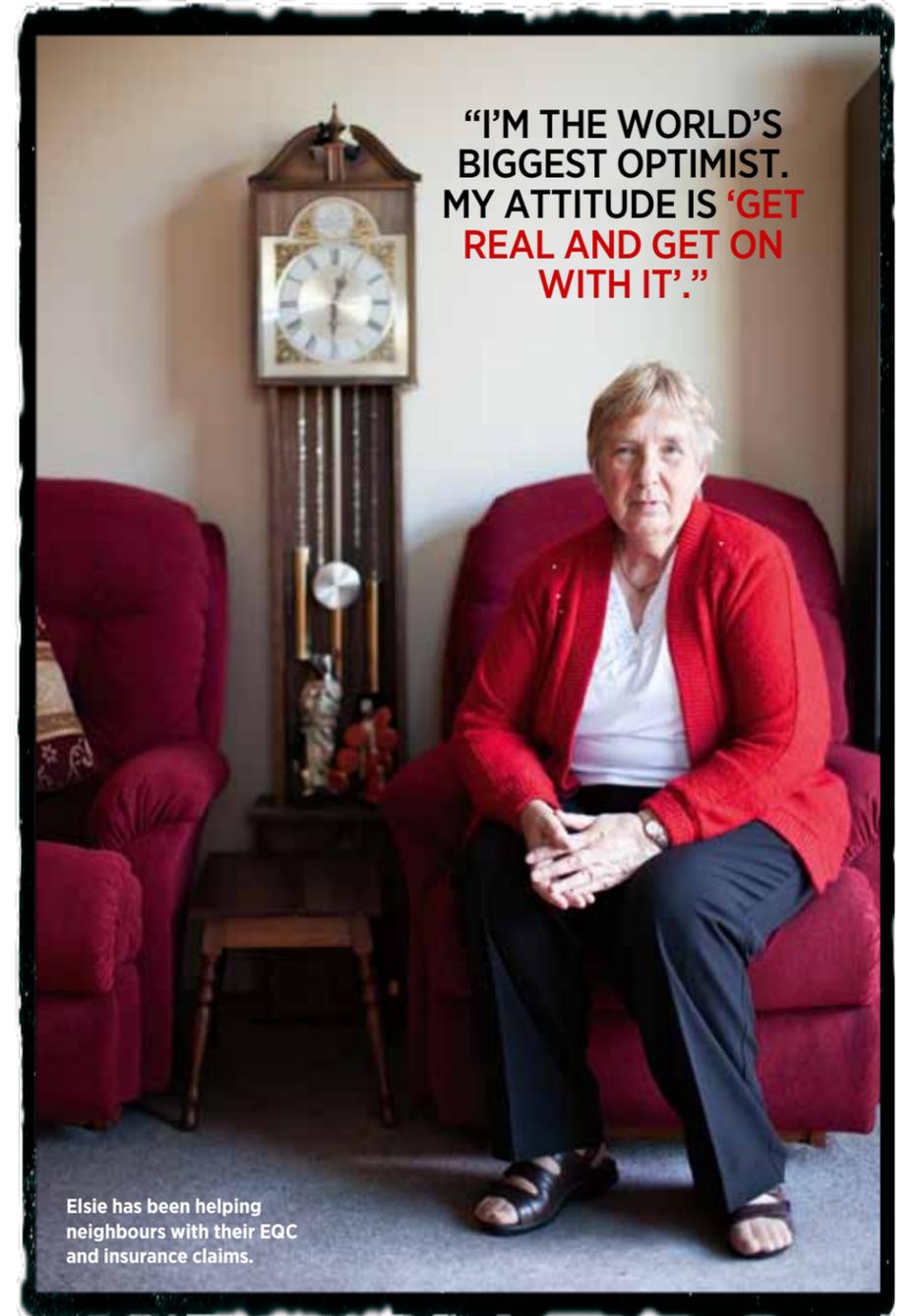
quite a strong person. Other people fall apart and get sick.”

Regardless of how long it takes to rebuild, Elsie is determined to return to Riverside Villas. She enjoys social aspects of the close-knit community, and it is conveniently close to her job with Supergrans, a group that supports low-income families.

Elsie works 15 hours a week teaching debt management, and puts in another 12 hours a week as a volunteer.

She predicts the workload for budget advisers will increase dramatically post-quake and is already dealing with clients who can’t clear debts by selling property because their homes were damaged. “Now they’re stuck with a house that can’t be sold because it needs fixing, so how do they get out of it?”

As for her own house, Elsie sees one advantage in having it pulled down: she can’t abide the colour scheme and plans to choose something more to her taste. ▶



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Elsie has been helping neighbours with their EQC and insurance claims.



It could be more than three years before the family's home is repaired.

LIVING IN LIMBO

In early December the Pockson family moved back into the lounge of their earthquake-damaged home in time to put up the Christmas tree.

The room had been a no-go area because of fears the windows would pop out of their frames in an aftershock.

Four years ago Lavina and Jeff Pockson bought a new home in Seabreeze Close, Bexley, one of the streets worst affected by the earthquake. Built on a former dump site, the quiet cul-de-sac borders picturesque wetlands and is a short drive from New Brighton beach.

Now, even after a major clean-up effort, the street still looks as if it is a beach. "People keep saying, 'You have a really big sandpit now,'" Lavina says.

They are living in limbo after being told it could be up to three years before their home is rebuilt. "You do want direction in your life and to have that whipped out from you is really horrible. I'd like to know where we'll be living and what we'll be doing next Christmas."

With no power, water or sewage, the couple fled their home, wading through deep silt carrying their three children Kaelani, five; Eva, two; and baby Charlie, three months, never intending to return.

Alarmed by reports of looting, the Pocksons moved all their belongings into storage. But after a month staying with relatives, they reluctantly moved back instead of renting accommodation.

They were concerned that the \$15,000 rental allowance from their insurance company would be exhausted well before their home was rebuilt and could not afford to pay both rent and a mortgage.

Although engineers passed the house as safe, Lavina is uncomfortable living with the obvious structural damage. "We were really frightened of this house; it was the trauma of standing in pitch blackness hearing it crack apart, hearing the concrete foundations break with really loud bangs and not knowing what it was."

The windows are crisscrossed with safety tape in case they shatter from the strain of being pushed out of shape as the house continues to sink, and there are cracks in the interior walls. In Eva's bedroom a large crack under the carpet lets in the damp so she shares a room with her older sister.

Lavina gets out as much as she can. "I don't enjoy my house the way I used to, it's not the happy, relaxed place it was. I love entertaining friends, having them over for coffee, but I don't want

to invite people over because the house doesn't look very nice the way it is."

She plays down aftershocks as much as possible for the sake of the kids, but the quake affected Kaelani.

"She'd go around and say, 'I think that crack is getting bigger, I'm worried about the house.' She wouldn't go to the toilet on her own because she doesn't like being alone in case there's an earthquake.

"One day I left the room and she lost the plot. She was worried a wrecking ball would come through the house. She'd heard the word demolition and thought it was going to happen immediately.

"She's still a happy child but her faith that everything is safe has changed."

Thanks to a mini septic tank installed in the berm outside their house, the Pocksons have avoided using kerbside portaloos, which have on occasion been pushed over and set alight by vandals.

Lavina says the insensitivity of sightseers who drive by at weekends to view the earthquake damage is also upsetting. "It's not nice to be the subject of people's entertainment. There was a family that went past very slowly, mum and dad in the front and kids in the back, licking their ice-creams, staring and pointing. I just about stormed out and said, 'How would you like to hold my baby while I scrub silt off my floors?'"

But good things have come of the earthquake too. The family enjoyed a free trip to Napier to give them a break from the aftershocks and Lavina says the disaster has drawn the community closer together. "The neighbours talk a lot more since this happened and that's one of the positives to have come out of this."

Watching TV footage of the aftermath of the devastating Haiti earthquake early in 2010 made her feel very fortunate.

"We have building codes that saved our lives and our children are not likely to get cholera. When I remind myself of things like that, I feel extremely lucky that we live in New Zealand.

However her fear is that as time passes, those unaffected by the earthquake will forget about those who were. "This is going to go on for years for us. Of course people are going to forget because it doesn't affect their daily lives, and we're going to have to be strong." ■