Three years after the Witch Creek fire claimed some 90 homes in Poway, the challenge of rebuilding remains.

The struggle continues for longtime Poway resident Tim Deehan and his family, whose incinerated lot in the High Valley community overlooking Lake Poway is now cleared of feverish ruins but has yet to see the reconstruction of a new house to call home.

"We still own the lot, but it's just not happening right now," said Deehan in a phone interview last week. "It took a lot of time and effort to clear the property. Rebuilding a house is another whole challenge."

After much deliberation, the Deehans—businessowners who run an intelligence technologies corporation—finally decided it was best to relocate to northern Virginia in late October 2009. Since the Deehan's primary clients are federal government-types headquartered in Washington, D.C., the couple decided to move closer to their customers, where they could be more attentive to business responsibilities and seek sanctum from the fire site stressors.

"We were up in the air for awhile but the reason we finally ended up leaving Poway was the litigation was still dragging on. We were stuck. We couldn't buy a house, couldn't build a house. We knew we'd be renting either way so we figured we might as well just get away from it for a while. If we weren't in limbo with house issues, we certainly wouldn't have moved to the East Coast, but it seemed like the best way to try to make up for the lost time."

Moving on

From his rental home 3,000 miles away, Deehan explained the varying degrees of difficulty that come with, first, losing a house and your possessions, and then dealing with insurance representatives, city officials, permits, documentation and sanctions necessary to rebuild. Additionally, the Deehans, like many Poway fire victims, filled out reams of paperwork only to be informed by FEMA that they were not eligible for aid.
"We still talk to folks in the neighborhood and most people have their houses going back up," he said via telephone from Virginia. "A couple neighbors had too much aggravation, and they just threw in the towel and sold the lots. But most people are back in the old neighborhood."

Deehan cites George Kehrer and his wife, both representatives of the nonprofit relief organization CARE, for their significant assistance in submitting insurance claims, making inventory of household items, and teaching them how to start over.

"Speaking with George Kehrer was the most helpful asset presented to us after we lost our home," Deehan said. "He and his family lost their home in Oakland in 1991, so they were able to relate and could explain things to us like no one else could. The city had types of recovery packages to learn from but the Kehrers could really talk to us. They had critical information first-hand about how to proceed. What we learned from them was really eye-opening."

"I remember sitting there listening to George talk to us for the first time and him saying, 'Most of the people in this room will learn that you are insured for about half of what you would need to build your house.' He was right. I think there were 93 homes lost in Poway, and the average for all of us was about half of the insurance we really needed."

Deehan maintains that the most disappointing cog in the process has been the mortgage and insurance company policies, which have seemed far from equitable or compassionate. But again, Deehan's contempt is tempered by the positives. "It's really despicable what mortgage and insurance will do to get their way out of the loss. But at the same time, the community was doing really nice things--real people showing us true human kindness, and that is what stays with me. I'll never forget even the littlest gestures people showed us when we needed it most. The most minor tokens of compassion give you a boost when you're down. It made me feel good about our community and about people in general."

Of all the innumerable things his family lost three years ago, Deehan says it's the little things they miss most, like San Diego summers and waking up to the view of Lake Poway. "We look at the pictures from all those years and we see the palm trees and the clear skies and I say, 'Man, that was really nice.'"

Deehan takes pleasure in all the joys that remain, like Ryan's present success at the University of Colorado, and 11-year-old Kayla's first winter in the snow (just to name a few).

"The fire was certainly a big blow, but these are all parts of life's experiences. It's just one of those things that you have to deal with. Hopefully, it makes people realize what they have--and I don't mean possessions. I mean, I hope people realize that life is so fragile. We lost our home and it was absolutely heart-breaking, but at the end of the day, I have to count my blessings because it's not as bad as it could be. At its worst, this is never as bad as it could be. We'll get through it and we'll be back in Poway again someday."

Catch up with the former Titan tight end Ryan Deehan amid his nationally anticipated junior year at the University of Colorado, Boulder in this Monday article.

**Related Topics:** Poway High, University of Colorado, Wildfires, and Witch Creek fire

How did the Witch Creek fires affect you? **Tell us in the comments.**