(William Jenkins/AfroLA)

Three months later after the Eaton Fire, Black Altadeneans wrestle with 'in-between' period

Altadena & Eaton Fire

by Aaricka Washington

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For esthetician Wei-Lin Chong-Cuatt, her hands are full. While Chong-Cuatt breastfed her newborn on a recent February day in her family's San Gabriel Valley Airbnb while her two eldest sons played with toy blocks and her other son ate lunch in his high chair.

It's a change of scenery for Chong-Cuatt, her husband and their four boys who are age 5 and younger in an area that was once reserved for backyard space at their Altadena home.

In March, Chong-Cuatt and her family moved into a cramped up space with her mother.

Three months earlier, they lived a more stable life.

But their lives, and the lives of thousands of others, changed on Jan. 7. Chong-Cuatt and her family are one of at least 2,800 Black households forced to evacuate within a day of the Eaton Fire's outbreak.

Since the fire, she and many other Black Altadeneans have shopped for new clothes and toys, applied for relief funds, navigated complicated insurance issues and tried to find ways to help their children cope with a new reality of starting completely over.

Altadenean Lynnelle Bryant, a certified interior designer, calls this time after the influx of immediate donations from charities and before the actual rebuild, the "in-between period."

Remnants of Lynnelle and Charles Bryant's home after the Eaton Fire. (Aaricka Washington/AfroLA)

Historically, Black families have had to deal with discrimination in finding housing in Los Angeles. Like many other urban areas, redlining relegated Black families who migrated to California to purchasing homes only in less desirable, or even toxic, areas. Altadena was one of few areas where they could easily buy and build generational wealth. Now, Black Altadeneans are reckoning with the loss of the capital that's already so hard for Black Americans to build.

According to a recent UCLA study, Black residents in Altadena were disproportionately impacted by the Eaton Fire. Sixty-one percent of Black households in Altadena were located within the fire perimeter, compared with 50% of non-Black households. About half of Black households were destroyed or were damaged, compared to 37% of non-Black households.

The Black homeownership rate in Altadena is at 81.5%.
AfroLA's Aaricka Washington spoke with four Black families navigating this "in-between period" that has impacted their already busy lives. These families are wrestling with insurance companies, long wait times for debris cleanup and finding mental health support. All are committed to rebuilding in Altadena. But the question remains: **How do you rebuild when there are financial, physical and emotional challenges before you lay the first brick?**

AfroLA first interviewed the families in February and then in April. Here are their stories:

Wei-Lin Chong-Cuatt

Chong-Cuatt and her husband are thinking about the environmental risks in rebuilding. Their house was only partially burned, but the garage was completely destroyed. Other nearby houses were burned to the ground.

"It's like we're in the same place as if our house had burned down, because we still have to get rid of everything," Chong-Cuatt said. "The house right next to ours [burned down]. All of that ash is in our home."

Wei-Lin Chong-Cuatt and her family of six moved into a cramped up space with her mother after the Eaton Fire. (William Jenkins/AfroLA)(William Jenkins/AfroLA)

She is still waiting for the Environmental Protection Agency to complete their debris clean up process. The EPA's decision to take hazardous waste to a staging area close to her home is also weighing heavily on her mind.

Her biggest concern, though, is bringing the kids back to a home where ash covers their belongings. Her 5-year-old son has said wants to go back to the house. He has been drawing pictures of the house on fire.

"It's obviously him coping with it," Chong-Cuatt said. "We talked about it. He's very open with us, with his feelings, and so that's very helpful, but it's just really sad."

Her son craves normalcy and wants to play with his toys. "We can't tell him…so we're trying to replace them here so that he doesn't have to deal with that," Wei-Lin said.

Chong-Cuatt's husband with their infant son. (William Jenkins/AfroLA)

When it comes to the clean up process at their home, she still doesn't want anything to happen to the kids due to water damage, soil contamination, poor air quality or any other environmental hazards.

When AfroLA followed up with Chong-Cuatt in April, she said her children are finally getting back into the routine of homeschooling while they live in a cramped space.

"We don't want them to have any breathing problems or any issues like that later on in life," she said. "We're trying to figure out whether or not to keep things or not, because basically everything that's porous we have to toss out. We're trying to figure out how careful we want to be, how safe we want it to be. It's a little overwhelming to be honest."

Communication with various agencies and organizations, she said, has been confusing and a hassle. Since FEMA announced that they would not order soil tests after burned lots are cleared of debris, she has had to coordinate on her own. She hired a company to test for toxins, and another to do smoke remediation.

"You would think that a company would just do the testing and then give you a recommendation of what to do and then do it," Chong-Cuatt said. "But no, it's all separate. It's like, they're making it more difficult for us."

Luckily, her mom owns the property that the family rents. The property's smoke remediation and environmental testing are both covered by home insurance.

Brian James

James's parents bought a house in 1968 for about $19,000. In February, AfroLA visited James's father's house and stood with him to reflect and grieve. Amidst the destruction, James recalled memories of hopping over the fence and playing with the neighborhood kids. He remembered riding his 3-speed bicycle down the street with his grandmother on the back of his banana seat. As an adult, James brought his kids to the house every day after school.

Brian James reflected on his childhood as he stood in front of what remains of his father's home. His parents bought the house in 1968 for about $19,000. (Aaricka Washington/AfroLA) In the midst of destruction.

Brian recalled memories of hopping over the fence and playing with the neighborhood kids. His father passed away a few days after the Eaton fire from dementia.

While his house about a mile away from his father's home wasn't burned, his barn was destroyed. The stalls had been empty since 2020 since he had to put the last of his three horses down, but they were a testament of Altadena's rural roots as a farming community. James remembered trail rides and riding his horses in parades as part of the New Buffalo Soldiers reenactment group of Black frontiersmen.

"I'm still a little bit in disbelief, certainly experiencing some survivor's remorse," James said. "I'm looking at my neighbors' homes. I'm looking at friends' homes. I've got relatives that have lost their homes, and I still have one. There's a little bit of remorse there, and I'm not ready to go back yet. Yet I know we need to come back to help preserve the Black essence of Altadena."

On Jan. 18, when the Eaton Fire was mostly contained, James's father passed away from dementia.

"He never knew [the house was gone] because of dementia, which is fortunate," James said. "It would have been absolutely crushing to him to see that."

James said while he misses his childhood home, he looks at the tragedy from two different angles.

"One is you can't go back and revisit that home and some of those memories, spaces and items," James said. "Those are gone. But at the same time, to go back to that house and see his room with him not there would have had another emotional impact."

James, principal at Wallis Annenberg High School, recently started the nonprofit Altadena Restoration Initiative: a Vision for Empowerment, or ARIVE. His goals include connecting residents with insurance support, mental health resources and vetted construction options for rebuilding. He and his team are collaborating with organizations like the Eaton Fire Coalition and Altadena Restoration Team, among other groups.

"We want to support the individuals," James said. "We want to make sure that the Black businesses that have been here, like [sandwich shop] Perry's Joint, are able to continue to thrive."

But months later, James said it's been challenging to get ARIVE off the ground.

"It's been tough for us to get going the way we want it to," James said. "It's the reality of life. The folks that are a part of it are full-time folks. I'm trying to get back to my house, I'm the principal of a school. It's just [time] has not been free and available the way I had hoped."

Going back to the house, he said, is too emotional.

In addition, he has to work with his sister when it comes to who they want to clean their dad's place.

Should they use a private service or the Army Corps of Engineers to come and clean? If they go private, which company is most affordable?

It's also been challenging accessing government relief funds. He received FEMA funding, but it didn't help his situation because it was a hotel voucher. He said he is still waiting to get L.A. County's Household Relief Fund Grant so he can use the funds as he sees fit.

"There was an expectation that people would have a little bit of seed money to get some things going and that's not necessarily the case," James said.

When it comes to rebuilding, he said there's no template for what they've all experienced.

"Does [rebuilding] happen in a year, or does it happen in three years?" James said. "Will it happen in five years? What can we do to help people weather that course?"

For him, this community holds a lot of value.

This Altadena street shows the damage wrought by the Eaton Fire. (Shady Grove Oliver/AfroLA)

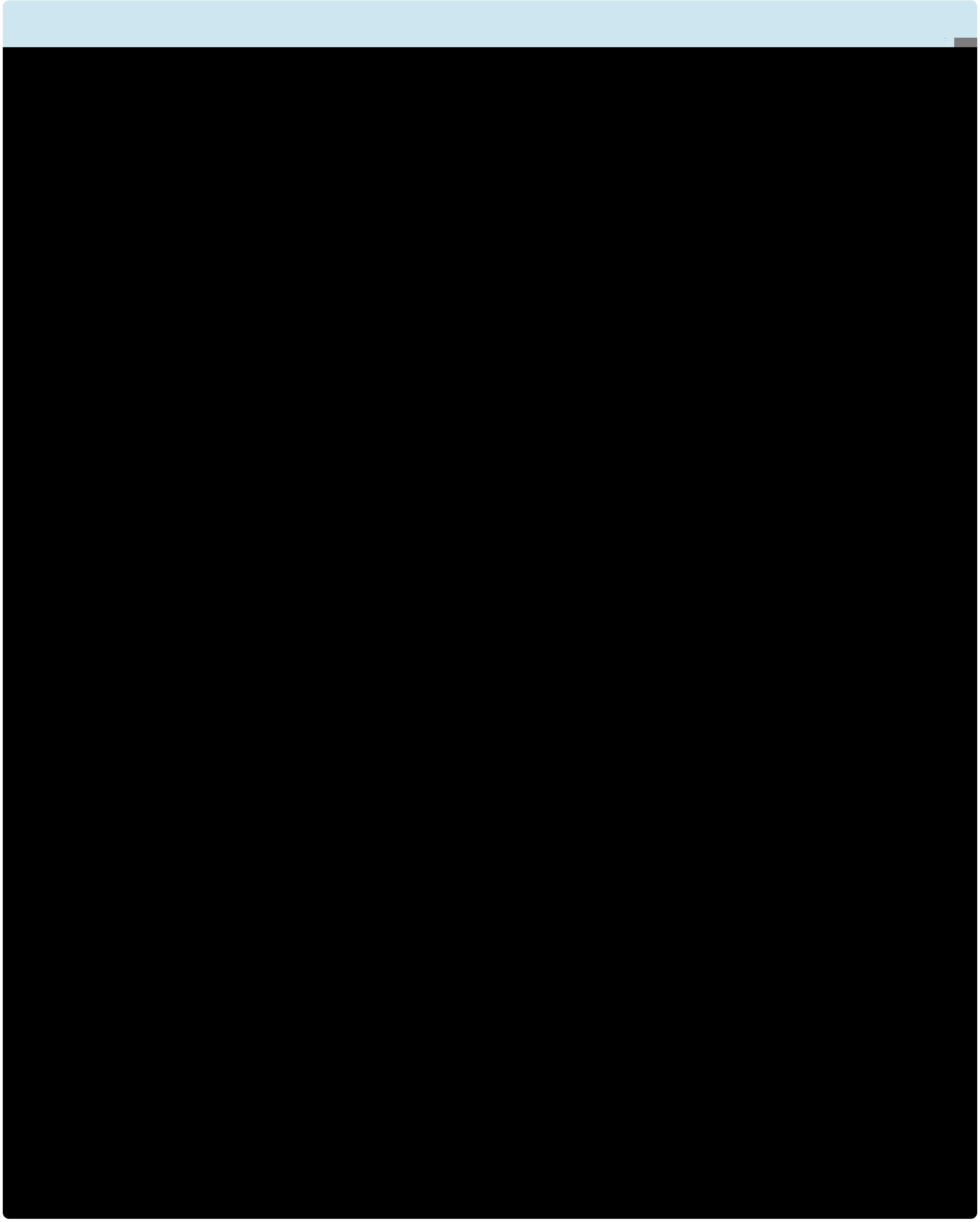
"There were villages all around Altadena, pockets of people that took care of one another," James said. "I don't think that gets conveyed quite enough so that people understand why it's so important for us to come back, and why it's so important for people of color to come back."

James said one thing lacking is mental health support for fire survivors. It would be nice if local agencies made themselves readily available whether at the park, through telehealth, through some kind of method, so people can talk about what they're going through, he said.

"It's going to be a multi-year process," James said. "What happens in between after you've met with your insurance and they say, 'OK, you're entitled to this much?' What are you going to do after you've met with [the] insurance [company] and they tell you that you're underinsured? What are you going to do? Who's going to support that from a mental [health] standpoint and from a financial standpoint?"

California homeowners were already experiencing an insurance crisis. And in L.A., the fires have only exacerbated issues. According to a UCLA economic forecast, total property and capital losses are estimated between $76 billion and $131 billion, and insured losses could be as high as $45 billion. That means Californians will pay higher insurance premiums. Some fire survivors were dropped from their insurance, were uninsured or didn’t have an insurance policy that covered the cost of rebuilding.

Even though the homeownership rate for Black residents in Altadena is above 80%, nearly double the national average, there are challenges that come with rebuilding when there is still a present racial wealth gap. According to Pew Research Center, the role of slavery and post-slavery segregation and discrimination policies resulted in disproportionate opportunities for accumulating wealth that have lingered even into present-day.



(Illustration by Tara A. James)

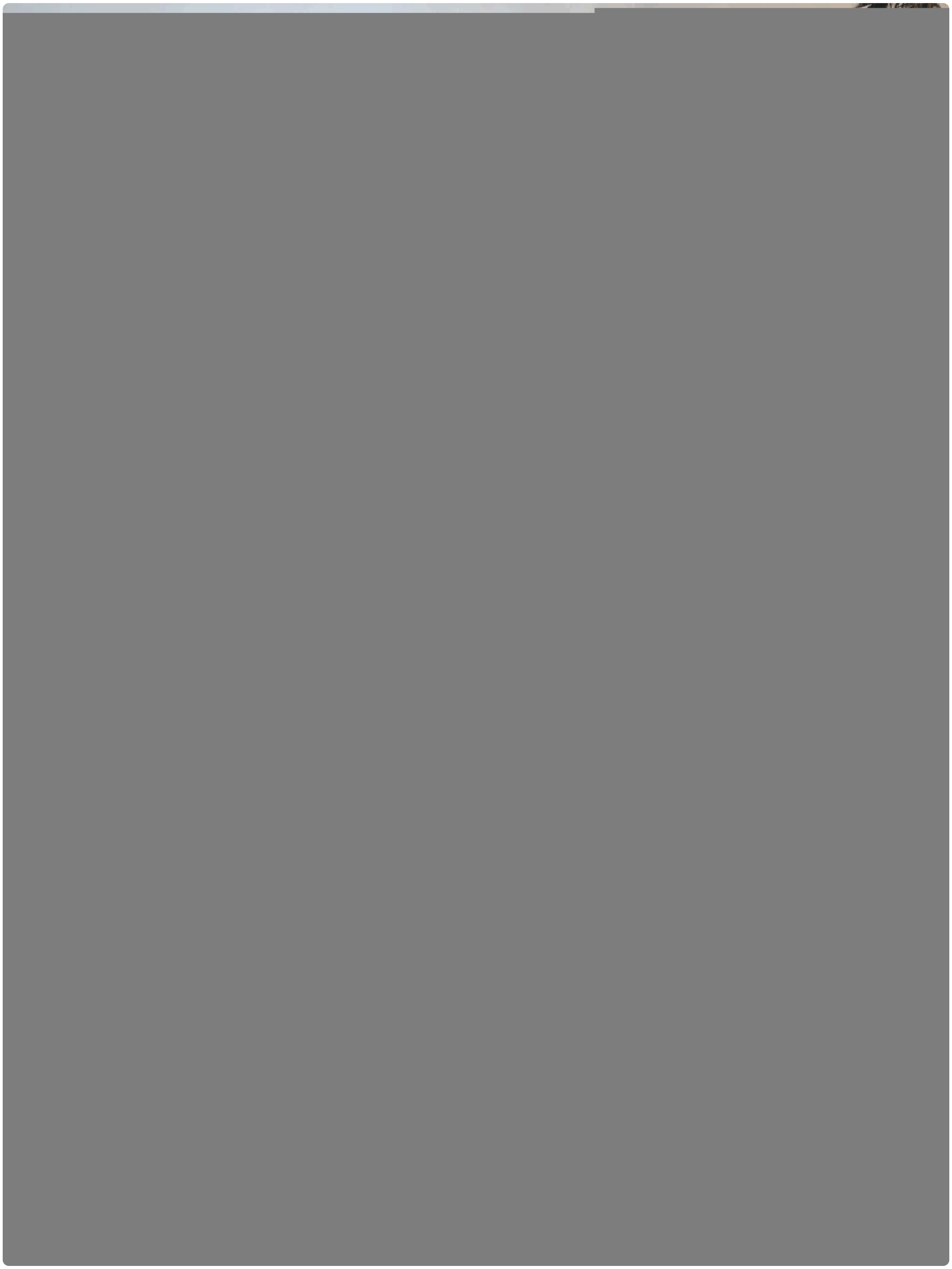
"We [Black Altadena] are not doing that, and we're not pulling the equity to make up the difference or funding it from some other source," James said. "Those are our realities."

He said that it's important for people to have support in the rebuilding process so they can protect themselves and their property.

Jamelle Peck

Peck showed AfroLA a picture of her red and white home located on a cul-de-sac surrounded by trees. She and her husband lived there for 30 years. Her body language became more sorrowful as she shared pictures of the fires' destruction. She and her husband lost most of their belongings.

"My emotions are like a roller coaster," Peck said. "There are days where I got this and then there are days where I'm having a tough time." In February, she found out she was able to pay off of her mortgage, lifting one burden off of her back.



Jamelle Peck's house in Altadena is on a cul-de-sac where she and her husband lived for 30 years. This is what the house looks like after the Eaton Fire in January. Peck said she and her husband lost most of their belongings in that house. (Courtesy of Jamelle Peck)

But months later, she is still displaced, staying with her relatives since she evacuated. She's in a room at her aunt's home, which is already crowded with three other relatives – her aunt, cousin, and her husband.

"People have been giving us stuff because we've had nothing, and so we're piling it all up in a tiny room with us and a bed, and that's it. You know, technically, really homeless," said Peck.

Her husband, who has cancer, has been in and out of the hospital.

"We are just kind of taking it day by day, trying to make sure that his medical condition stays stable," Peck said.

In this in-between period, after the rush of help from charities and individuals and before the rebuilding process, she said it's been "traumatizing" to itemize everything that was in her home before the insurance company will pay out. Peck said she only has about three remaining outfits for her job.

"That is difficult. It's emotionally trying, because every day you think of something you had and you don't have it anymore," Peck said. "I just feel it's kind of crappy of the insurance company to make me list all that stuff before they pay me."

So many people and organizations in L.A. and beyond donated clothes for fire survivors. So much so that some organizations started limiting the quantity and quality of the clothes that could be donated. Some organizations suggested donating gift cards or cash instead so people could spend the money how they saw fit to meet their needs.

A volunteer delivers pizza to people helping sort donations during the Dena Relief Drive at the Flintridge Center in Pasadena on Jan. 12. (Shady Grove Oliver/AfroLA)

Peck is a risk management consultant for Culver City. She said she only has about three remaining outfits for her job. “In your personal life, you have a style,” Peck said. “When you go shopping for yourself there is a style that you are trying to achieve with whatever you buy. When people give you clothes, they are not giving to your style. So you get these things, and some of them fit. Some of them don’t fit. Some of them, you look at it and it’s like, never in a million years would I put that on.”

Shopping has now become overwhelming for her. Instead of just buying one or two items, she now has to think about her whole entire wardrobe.

She said the EPA just removed the debris from the lot, which clears the way for them to rebuild. But, she said, her family is not trying to build right away because of uncertainty with the economy, especially amidst a global trade war.

“We want to wait until the dust settles down,” Peck said. “It may never settle down. We may be faced, in several years, with trying to build something, but we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“It’s hard going up there looking at the burn scars now with the property clear,” Peck said. “You know, at one level, it looks like things can happen. There can be hope for new growth to begin. So that’s one thing that I’ve gotten done. And part two of what I’ve gotten done is starting to look for an apartment, a place to live.”

She hasn’t been able to replace her 2015 Buick Verano yet, which was burned in the fire. She said that it was in great condition, but she’s in no rush to buy a car since she is using her husband’s car in the meantime and has other priorities.

When it comes to mental health support, she said it’s been a struggle for her to find the best match for a therapist. She doesn’t want to be placed on a waiting list for group therapy and her insurance has a limited number of providers. She was initially paired with a white therapist, but it didn’t work for her. She prefers to have someone who can culturally relate to her.

“Culturally, there are a lot of differences and prejudices that are heavy in the air,” Peck said. “They understand losing my home and all of that, but the cultural implications of it, long term for me as an African American, they don’t understand that.”

Three months later, Peck said she still struggles with her mental health.

“I feel sad,” Peck said. “I am betwixt and between. What’s on my mind is…‘What do I do next?’ The question that comes up all the time is, ‘Am I going to rebuild, or am I going to move today?’ I want to rebuild. That’s where I am today. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to be there tomorrow. It’s kind of waking up and every day is its own adventure in terms of, what can I get done to move us a little further, to getting [back] in our house?”

Jamelle Peck house's in Altadena is on a cul-de-sac where she and her husband lived for 30 years. Peck held a picture of what the home looked like before the Eaton Fire. (Aaricka Washington/AfroLA)

One of the things that drives her to want to rebuild is the generational wealth she could leave to her daughter.

"Part of the legacy that I have is passing what you have down to your kids, even if it's a little bit of nothing," Peck said. "That's what I envisioned. If I sell, I could leave $100,000 or $300,000 in the bank for her, but it's not the same. But the easy way out…sell, buy something or go rent something for the rest of my life or go travel, get an apartment and go see the world. I don't know. That leaves nothing to my heirs."

Before the fires, Peck and her family had a home-based business where her husband made and sold jams and preserves, and she made cookies from the fruit trees they had in their backyard.

She was told by the Army Corps of Engineers and the debris removal services that her orange tree, two pomegranate trees and my apple tree survived. Her avocado tree did not.

But, she said, they only removed 3 inches of topsoil, when they have to go down 6 inches to remove the toxins. She said she may have a new construction contractor take off some more of the soil. She wants to be extra cautious.

"You hear so many stories years later of people getting cancer and then you find out that they lived on top of a toxic dump, or they lived under power lines," Peck said. "At one level, you have to go with nothing is safe, but you need to be as safe as you can be. You need to not take that step for granted. I see the effects of cancer on my husband, and I'm good today, but how does that manifest itself over time?"

In her mind, she's thinking of the risks of moving her husband back there in his already vulnerable condition. She's also considering moving back with her daughter who lives outside of New Orleans, but she wants to wait until her husband is in a stable condition which will take several months.

But if she does move, the dangers of natural disasters are still present. Some of her family members were Hurricane Katrina survivors.

"They're doing great," Peck said. "They've rebuilt. They've survived. They put kids through college. They're working. They're thriving. They're happy. That's one of the things they said to me… 'You'll be fine.' That gives me a lot of hope."

Lynnelle and Charles Bryant

Lynnelle and Charles Bryant run an architecture and interior design planning firm called Masbuild Inc. They have been in their Altadena home on just over two acres for 23 years, but in they have lived in the region for more than three decades. Lynnelle's lived here since they married in 1991, but Charles has lived here since 1983.

"I liked the area," Charles said. "It was affordable. It was what they called the best kept secret, and we weren't telling anybody, because houses were very affordable."

Even though they've faced the threat of wildfires before, they've never worried about their house being burned to the ground. Still, the design professional duo remain hopeful when it comes to rebuilding, and helping others with the process. The couple planted more than 80 fruit trees on the property. The lemons and kumquats survived the fire's heat.

Lynnelle and Charles Bryant point to what is left of the fruit trees in their backyard. (Aaricka Washington/AfroLA)

Since AfroLA spoke to the Bryants in February, they said some adjustments to their rebuilding plan had to be made to fit code requirements. Right now, they are working on 11 projects for rebuilding in addition to their home.

Lynnelle is enthusiastic about helping others in Altadena remodel the homes as they rebuild, adding in additional bathrooms and ADUs that they've wanted, but weren't able to build.

"[Apart from any changes in taxes, there is…] nothing stopping you from building the house that you wanted," she said.

When it comes to donations from generous individuals and organizations, Lynnelle said she and Charles have been taking full advantage of the free things people have offered.

"The dance classes, the art classes that help you decompress and stuff. Our church has been excellent," she said.

Lynnelle said she's concerned, though, for Black Altadena.

"When you go to [rebuild], there will be resources and support for you then, but the middle is where you see, where you see the people can get lost," she said. "It's the most difficult part for our communities of color and those that are not resourced as well…You can end up losing your foothold."

She has a friend that is uninsured that is getting help from FEMA and charities.

Lynnelle and Charles Bryant lived in their Altadena house for 23 years before it burned down in the Eaton Fire. Their house is located on just over two acres of land and includes dozens of fruit trees and plants. (Courtesy of Lynnelle and Charles Bryant)

"But the reality is," she said, "They can only do so much, and so for her to continue to cover, let's say her mortgage…is one thing. But how will she finance rebuilding? And some people are at an age where they even really don't have the ability to do more."

She said she and Charles have counseled clients about talking with their family members, the next generation, about how they can step up and create a plan for the future.

At one point there were seven people living in the house — Lynnelle, Charles, their four kids and Charles's sister. But since their kids have grown up, they've been empty-nesters. Even before the fires they had plans to remodel the house.

Now, they're more driven to do it. They want to build with climate resilience and environmental safety in mind: installing sprinklers, using fiber-reinforced concrete, and creating buffers around the house without vegetation.

The close proximity of trees to the house is something she wants to consider as well.

"It would be irresponsible for us to not design in preparation for [future wildfires]," Lynnelle said. "Considering that we're sitting so close to the mountains there, you want it to be green and lush and all that in the vegetation. So we've got to find a balance between making sure that we're respecting the environment, but also protecting the property."

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