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Water, Water Everywhere: A Cautionary Tale

By Cathy Dausman



Water damage was extensive at Cynthia Brian's home. Photos courtesy Cynthia Brian

negative for mold. Brian was very happy with the restoration company and construction crew, and recommends homeowners act quickly if something similar happens to them. She also urged homeowners to interview a reputable and licensed contractor, and to read their insurance policies now and check coverage.

Although Brian dealt with good adjusters when filing her claim, she cautions the overall experience can be really, really tough, adding they practically had to start over with the process when their insurance company was bought out by another.

As a precaution, the Brians now shut off their main water line before they travel. "I wasn't expecting this," Brian said.

Moraga police lieutenant Jon King was not expecting it either when he endured a house flood caused by a water main break in 2007, saying he would like to avoid repeating the experience. "It's no fun," he said plainly. Still, he was willing to share the experience hoping that someone else can be better prepared before the predicted El Nino storms arrive this winter.

King's Castro Valley hillside house was directly in the path of water from a 12-inch East Bay Municipal Utility District water main rupture in December 2007. "We had our (Christmas) tree up. My wife and I had gone to Walnut Creek for a dinner date when I got a call from a neighbor," King

Lamorinda Weekly writer Cynthia Brian left her house last February on a family vacation and returned to find "a nightmare."

A relatively minor pipe repair gone awry upstairs leaked and then failed; the result was water cascading downstairs and throughout the 25-year-old house, affecting walls, ceiling and floors.

Brian was in shock when she first viewed the damage. "I really loved the house the way it was before," she said.

Brian tried to contain the damage herself, hauling out a hundred towels and sheets, but quickly realized she needed a professional restoration company. They trailered two portable storage units on site, boxed household belongings, removed standing water, the carpets and flooring and tore out sheetrock walls. Twelve fans were brought in to dry the structure.

For the next eight months the Brians walked on floors covered in plastic sheeting and lived with the smell of chemicals and the noise of construction. No room was untouched, Brian said. "Every time they exposed something, they'd find something new."

Specifying and sourcing new materials, being available to the crews, dealing with insurance, then unpacking their stored household goods and setting the house to right was so incredibly time consuming, Brian said it became a second full-time job.

She estimates repair costs ran over \$200,000.

One bit of good news: the house tested

said. "(The water) is kinda going by," the neighbor told him, then added, "Oh, no. It's in your garage!"

King and his wife rushed home in time to see water sluicing downhill, shooting a geyser 20 feet in the air when it hit a tire of his unmarked patrol car parked curbside. "There were flumes of water across driveways," he said. The water "completely flooded the first two (hilltop) houses," invaded a neighbor's crawl space, dumped two to three inches of water in their garage, and even managed to infiltrate a closed refrigerator located inside. Water pooled near the front door was only an inch from the sill. It gained entry into their son's room through another door, soaking the carpet and sheetrock and depositing a "fine mud" throughout.

King shook his head and said: "You don't even want to think what is in that water."

The force of the water lifted the asphalt along his street's new paving and completely ruined the King's new front and back yard landscaping, as well as anything that was on the floors in the affected areas. King lost a digital movie camera he left in a backpack on the floor. All told the water damage caused an estimated \$25,000 to repair, which was relatively minor compared to his neighbor's \$100,000 in damages.

"I never thought that water could cause that much damage," King said, before adding gratefully that "EBMUD took care of business."

The Kings "hustled" through their repair work in a mere 30 days - the family planned to host a Christmas celebration. Their more seriously affected neighbors' houses took six months to repair. "And that was not even an El Nino event," King said.

"The moral of the story is be prepared," he said. "We know El Nino is coming. Pick up leaves from your gutters and clear out drains. Have first aid supplies and a box of candles handy," he said. "Be prepared for a power loss of 48 to 72 hours, and watch your distressed trees" for signs of uprooting. "There are only so many aid crews (available during a disaster), and we're not going to be the only ones affected."





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