

## 10 years after fatal mudslide, tiny La Conchita accepts the risks

*A decade after La Conchita's mudslide tragedy, the pull of community proves stronger than fear*

**Amanda Covarrubias, Los Angeles Times, 1-3-15**

A child's dollhouse jammed against a chain-link fence marked "No Trespassing" sits in the shadow of a mangled brick home covered in clotted dirt.

Two faded white crosses lie toppled on a mound of soil taller than a man; nearby, upended planters where someone's flowers once grew sprout weeds. A hand-painted sign dangling in the ocean breeze reads, "Do Stuff That Makes Buddha Happy."

The events of Jan. 10, 2005, when 400,000 tons of mud slid down the bluff behind La Conchita, killing seven adults and three children, are frozen in the eerie tableau — a reminder of the hidden dangers lurking beneath the surface. The tragedy came 10 years after the hill collapsed in 1995 when nine homes were lost.

Yet the possibility of the slope crashing again toward the Pacific Ocean has done little to dissuade people from putting down roots in the eclectic Ventura County beach community near the Santa Barbara County line. As the 10-year anniversary of the deadly slide approaches, the 500-foot cliff remains unfortified, and at least four ramshackle houses sit seemingly undisturbed since the last rescue crews left town.

Faded memories, relatively inexpensive real estate and a wide beach not far from the famous Rincon surf point tend to dull the perception of risk. It helps that the ranch at the top of the hill stopped irrigation leaks that residents contended caused the slope to erode.

But the town of 300 residents wedged between the hill and U.S. Highway 101 has another, less tangible draw to survivors and newcomers — community.

"Culturally, it's so similar to Mexico with how important family is," said Kelly Hill, who grew up in La Conchita and moved back last year with her husband and 9-year-old son. "It's like a little fishing village in Mexico. It's the American Mexican fishing village."

In La Conchita, where the closest store is five miles away in Carpinteria, people watch out for each other's children, who play hide-and-seek on the narrow streets and run through the grass-covered alleys.

In 2003, only three children lived in town; today, there are more than 30, said Mike Bell, chairman of the La Conchita Community Organization, formed after the 2005 landslide to address safety concerns. Multiple generations of families call the town home.

"It shows there's a strong future for La Conchita," said Bell, who with his wife moved to the unincorporated Ventura County community in 1999 after he retired from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

For Hill, the decision to move back to La Conchita, where her parents and a younger sister live, was gut-wrenching. She lived in town during both landslides, witnessing the second from the back deck of the home she and her husband rented. It was soon deemed unsafe to live in and red-tagged.

"I was pregnant, homeless and walking on the beach with my dad when we got kicked out," Hill said. "Things were in limbo after we left."

She and her husband, Rich, and their son, Zane, lived in Carpinteria and San Diego for the next nine years, until a house up the street from her parents' went on the market.

That's when she began poring over a state study commissioned after the 2005 landslide that said a \$50-million grading project would make most of the community safe. The report said, essentially, that those homes farther from the slide zone were safer than those closer to it.

"I went through it I don't know how many times, wondering if it really was safe," Hill said. "Hopefully, we are in a safe zone. Life is full of risks, and I don't know how you can live and be safe all the time. We're just hoping everything holds and there's not another slide again."

Three children, all sisters, were killed when the hill collapsed in 2005: Hannah, 10, Raven, 6, and Paloma, 2, daughters of Michelle Wallet, 37, who also died.

Firefighters who found the Wallet sisters said it looked as if they had been sitting side by side on a couch. The other victims were John Morgan, 56; Tony Alvis, 53; Charles Womack, 51; Patrick Rodreick 47; Christina Kennedy, 45; and Vanessa Bryson, 28.

After the 2005 disaster, there were calls for the county to buy up all the homes through eminent domain and never allow anyone to live there again. It was an idea that came and went, as was the grading project.

"The county does not have the authority to say people can't live there," Ventura County Supervisor Steve Bennett, who represents La Conchita, said recently. "There's a complexity of issues, with the potential for lawsuits and exposing taxpayers to more liability. The county has not found it appropriate to move forward with taxpayer dollars on any stabilization project."

Bell said residents may try to raise the money themselves. Meanwhile, he says, La Conchita is better prepared should it get hit again. Sleeping bags, ice chests, portable tables, tents, lights, radios, a generator and other emergency supplies, all paid for by the community, fill a storage shed. A tractor the organization bought for about \$16,000 is parked outside.

"We have what we need to get started from the ground up," Bell said.

Although La Conchita didn't get the hill reinforced, the state recently completed a pedestrian undercrossing to the beach and a bikeway that stretches from Seacliff to Carpinteria as part of a highway widening project. Before, beachgoers had to hunch over and walk through a drainage pipe under the highway to reach the water.

After the 2005 tragedy, research geologist Randy Jibson of the U.S. Geological Survey authored a study of La Conchita. He said the remaining houses are in one of the most slide-prone areas in the nation and not safe places to live.

"Future landslides are inevitable there," Jibson said at the time.

That kind of talk does not discourage Ernie Garcia, 88, a World War II veteran who tools around on a black bicycle. He moved to La Conchita in the mid-'80s with his wife, Beverly, after he retired from Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank.

"I've seen the trauma of war," Garcia said. "What do I have to be afraid of?"

When he walks out his front door on Zelzah Street, he sees a misshapen house half-buried in earth, surrounded by a chain-link fence that he's decorated with plastic flowers and wreaths, now faded by time. The former residents got out alive, he said.

Despite the risks, he would not live anywhere else.

"It's so quiet here, and nobody comes around," he said. "At night, I can hear an avocado drop on the roof next door."

For Dan Alvis, whose younger brother, Tony, an avid outdoorsman and backcountry guide, was killed in 2005, the events of nearly 10 years ago are almost too unbearable to recall.

"I cried myself to sleep for seven years," Alvis said recently, his eyes tearing, too upset to talk anymore.

Alvis, who lost a home in each of the landslides, moved in with his parents after the 2005 tragedy. Their La Conchita house faces the bluff — and a string of residences lined up across the base.

"Where else am I going to go?" Alvis said. "This is my home."