

Fire victims receive houses

Knysna Municipality handed over the keys to 29 houses on 23 October 2020. According to Executive Mayor Elrick van Aswegen, the Western Cape Department of Human Settlements funded the project, and all recipients had lost their informal settlement homes during the fires that devastated most of Knysna in June 2017.

“This was the worst disaster of its kind in our history,” he said. “Not only did hundreds upon hundreds of people in the affected area lose their homes or their business, the fires even claimed the lives of people lost too soon.”

The day of the handover was, however, met with excitement and joy. Recipients’ reactions varied from laughter and smiles to tears of relief; from joyful ululating to silences of grateful disbelief.

Winile Mali had lost everything to the fire. “My house burnt to the ground,” she said. “I only managed to save myself. I was in such a state of shock, I did not even realise that I was not dressed! I have been asthmatic ever since, but I am grateful to be alive and overjoyed with this immense gift.”

“What if I’m so happy that I die before even sleeping in my new house?” joked 80-year old recipient Yoliswa Kilimani.

Vathiswa Kopese was extremely excited, saying, “I can’t begin to describe the joy that comes with knowing that I have a house of my own after three years of fighting, suffering and being subjected to the elements.”

“Now I have a safe place to raise my children,” said Nandipha Mhambi. “Now we have a home. Thank you.”

Van Aswegen said that many of the material things that were lost would never be recovered. “Many people will live with the trauma caused by this disaster for years to come,” he concluded. “And, while we cannot replace or fix everything the fires took or destroyed, it gives me great joy to know that we could help these new homeowners, with assistance from provincial government. This is an example of how we work towards being inspired, innovative and inclusive.”

An official handover with the Western Cape Department of Human Settlements will be held in due course.

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