

Home Away from Home... and the River... brings Peace of Mind

Cliff and Eleanora Arntz no longer worry about losing their home to another flood.

They've moved far away now from the river that took the house in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where they had lived for 43 years and raised their six children.

In some respects, the move was hard, they say. They lived in an older, quiet, tree-lined area known as Lincoln Park. They had good neighbors. Cliff was especially proud of his evergreen trees. Eleanora's favorites were the apricot and walnut trees. And, after all, it was their house.

But in 1997, the Red River of the North took the house and the neighborhood they'd loved away from them. The river, a mere block or two away and behind an earthen dike, had gotten into the neighborhood three or four times over the years. Even so, water had never entered the Arntz' story-and-a-half house. Not even in the basement, Eleanora says firmly. When the river crested at 54.3 feet, water was up to the middle of the attic windows.



Cliff and Eleanora Arntz feel safer now in their new home away from the river.



The Arntz's home for 43 years succumbs to floodwaters in April 1997. Cliff Arntz says when he saw this scene, he knew they'd never be able to go back home. Photo courtesy of Cliff and Eleanora Arntz.

Because of that single flood event, Cliff and Eleanora, both 79, say they wouldn't live there again even if they could have saved their home.

"To go back down there now, I'd be more afraid," says Cliff. "Here, I have no qualms about a flood anymore. We are far enough away that we never should be bothered again."

The Arntzes were the first Grand Forks residents to accept a voluntary buyout of their flood-damaged property. The buyout of their entire neighborhood was funded with about \$12.5 million provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and about \$1.7 million from the State of North Dakota. The buyouts are part of a hazard mitigation grant program that provides federal and state money to projects that will reduce or prevent future disaster damages and eliminate the need for disaster-recovery funding.



Demolition was the best option for the Arntz's flood-ravaged home. The couple was the first to voluntarily sell their home to the city. Under the terms of the buyout, the land will forever remain as open space. Photo courtesy of Cliff and Eleanora Arntz.

New house, new home

Seven months after the flood, Cliff and Eleanora moved into a new house, in a new neighborhood that the city built to help relocate residents displaced from Lincoln Park and other flooded areas. It wasn't a hard choice to make, they say.

"The first time we saw the [old] house was a week after the crest," Cliff remembers. "The biggest share of it was still filled with water. The garage was still almost submerged. We knew we would never go back down there."

After the water subsided, they found that the house had shifted slightly off the foundation. Inside, there was about a foot of soggy insulation from ceilings that had collapsed. Every possession they hadn't gotten out at the time of the evacuation was water-soaked or caked with sludge.

The couple feels fortunate to have been able to choose a buyout. They wanted to stay in Grand Forks. For both of them, long-since retired, the thought of starting over with a mortgage and living on Social Security was daunting. But with their buyout proceeds, their savings, money from fundraisers by family and friends, donations and gifts, they were able to buy their new \$110,000 house free and clear.

In all, about 350 flood-ravaged properties in their old neighborhood were voluntarily sold to the city. Another 249 properties, farther from the river but still in the floodplain, were bought out, too. The structures have since been demolished, leaving green space behind. According to the terms of the buyout, the land must remain open and undeveloped forever.

The old neighborhood is still quiet. Cliff still likes to visit his trees. But he also likes to go back at night to a home where he knows he is safe. For the two of them, life is still good.