



DIANA BALDRICA/THE FRESNO BEE

The Coalition for Urban Renewal Excellence (CURE) and its local partners dedicated a new home to the Escalante family Saturday in Calwa. Pictured, center, Sylvia Escalante is overcome with emotion after seeing a huge black and white photograph of her two daughters, Ruvi and Anna, framed in the new home.

### **From the ashes ...**

## **Sylvia Escalante lost her two daughters and house to a fire, but she's home again.**

**By Louis Galvan / The Fresno Bee**

11/17/07 23:22:37

Nine months after Sylvia Escalante lost her two daughters in a fire that destroyed their Calwa home, she has a house again.

With her son and her mother at her side, and in the company of about 100 other family members and supporters, Escalante got the keys Saturday to a house built with the help of a nonprofit group.

She said she was happy to be home.

"But I can't help but having mixed emotions," Escalante said. "I'm ready to live here again, but I feel like I came back empty-handed, because my two little girls are not with me."

Early on the morning of Feb. 7, Ruvi Escalante, 8, and Anna Nicole Romero Escalante, 9, were trapped when an accidental electrical fire swept through the family's home on the 2400 block of South Ninth Street.

There were no smoke detectors in the house, Fresno County Fire Protection District investigators reported, and the windows were covered with bars, making it more difficult for firefighters to get in.

The sisters were unconscious when firefighters found them. Ruvi died that morning at University Medical Center. Anna was admitted to the hospital in critical condition and died the next day.

Their deaths prompted an outpouring of community support for the family. To help with the rebuilding effort, the Coalition for Urban Renewal Excellence joined the California Professional Association of Specialty Contractors, which provided volunteer contractors.

Nathan Magsig, CURE executive director, and Courtney Blore, CALPASC executive director, said their partnership -- along with an outpouring of donations from the community -- saved the project thousands of dollars.

"All these people who helped not only donated their time and materials, but also their hearts," Blore said.

The result is a four-bedroom, two-bathroom, 1,400-square-foot home with a detached two-car garage.

Originally, organizers thought it wouldn't be done until Christmas. The project -- completely furnished and landscaped -- was finished a month ahead of schedule, which will enable the family to eat its Thanksgiving dinner at the new home.

"I'll cook the turkey," Escalante said.

On Saturday, in an emotional dedication and housewarming program, Escalante, her son Juan Gonzales, 13, and her mother, Ana Maria Escalante, 54, got their first look at their new home.

In the living room, a large photo of her daughters was hanging on a wall. Overcome with emotion and supported by those around her, Escalante reached out to touch the photograph with one hand, while wiping her tears with the other.

Ana Maria Escalante also cried. "They loved living here," she said. "I miss them every day."

Ana Maria Escalante prepared 1,000 tamales to serve the crowd after the tour of the house. "I have no words to really say how I feel about all the support we've received," she said.

Firefighters were also on hand, exchanging hugs with Escalante family members.

"They've become like family to many of us," said Capt. Mike Bowman, a spokesman for Cal Fire-Fresno County Fire Protection District.

The district launched a countywide free distribution of smoke alarms and batteries shortly after the fire. Bowman said the program has distributed and installed about 1,000 smoke alarms in four rural communities so far.

On Dec. 1, another distribution is planned for Caruthers, where about 700 homes will be visited.

Sylvia Escalante has joined the past distribution efforts as a volunteer. On Saturday, she promised to continue to support the program.

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Sylvia Escalante wipes tears from her eyes outside her new home that was dedicated for her and her family Saturday in Calwa. Last February, a fire broke out in her family's home while she was at work. The home was not equipped with smoke detectors, and her two daughters, Ruvi and Anna, died in the fire.