

# When Fire Strikes

By BARBARA STEWART  
(NY Times, June 15, 2003)

## YONKERS

WHAT happens - to people, to neighborhoods, to a city - after a great fire, like the ones that swept this city in mid-March? Taken together, two fires that occurred over a single weekend were among the worst ever to hit Westchester, or, for that matter, the greater New York region.

The first blazed up shortly after midnight on an icy Friday in Nodine Hill, a struggling immigrant neighborhood. By dawn, seven aging, rundown houses on Oak Street were charred lumber and 10 were damaged. Two hundred and twenty-one people fled their homes. And five people in one family - the Velezes - were killed: two that night, three others died in the weeks that followed. The only survivors are a 19-year-old woman who had spent the night with a friend, and two boys, a 3-year-old who was staying with his grandmother and an 8-month-old whose father covered him with a blanket while running out of the flaming house, tossed him to a rescue worker and stumbled to the ground, burning like a torch before he could be saved.

Two days later, fire swept from the first floor to the roof of Wakefield Towers, a grand old apartment building on Bronx River Road, filled with a friendly mix of young families, middle-aged professionals and elderly people in lofty rent-controlled apartments. By the time residents had left noon Mass at nearby St. Barnabas's, flames were shooting from windows. By evening, the interior was gutted and the roof caved in. And another 275 people were out of homes.

The Nodine Hill fire was started by two vagrants, homeless people who had taken shelter in a vacant, city-owned building and had started a fire, apparently to keep warm. They also said they had been smoking crack cocaine. They were arrested and charged with criminal trespass.

The Wakefield Towers fire started in a closet in an apartment on the first floor. The closet was next to a shaft that ran vertically through the building, and the flames traveled through the shaft to the roof.

Though outsiders tend to forget about big fires soon after the embers cool, victims take months or longer to adjust. The stories of fires are about loss and grief, about coming to terms with the destruction of one's home, possessions and security - and, for the profoundly unlucky, of loved ones. It is a huge, expensive loss for Yonkers itself, as well as individual victims.

The Oak Street houses, which were close-set and made of aging wood, blazed up so rapidly and burned so thoroughly that nothing could be salvaged, during or after the fire. Now the blocklong site is partly bulldozed. But charred chunks of frame and blackened bricks still stand. The yellow brick exterior of Wakefield Towers still stands, with its ornate turrets and gargoyles. At first glance, the building looks habitable, except for a blackened roof line, and residents assumed that the damage was relatively light. Days after the fire, when they were allowed in for 20 minutes to salvage important papers, they realized the extent of the destruction: the interior was gutted, the roof caved in and their possessions soaked by the six million gallons of water used to put out the flames.

"It was gut-wrenching," said Michael Cahalin, the co-op board president. Almost half of the 106 apartments were destroyed and the rest were damaged by smoke and water. "People came out crying and clutching soggy papers," he said.

The clothes that Viola Daquila, 75, retrieved were ruined by the smoke. She and Albert, her 77-year-old husband, spent weeks ironing documents dry and copying them.

YONKERS, with a population of 297,000, has a wide range of neighborhoods: from leafy and suburban to gritty and impoverished, with many gradations between. Nodine Hill is one of the poorest. For some 200 years, it has been home to new immigrants, from Germans and Irish to Hispanic, as well as African-Americans. Not long ago, it was sturdily blue collar, with turn-of-the-century wooden houses so close-set that neighbors could smell one another's cooking.

But over the past 15 years, crack and drug dealing soared, and crime shot up. A 2-year-old girl sitting in her living room watching television was killed by a stray bullet two years ago.

Wakefield Towers, on the other hand, is a gracious old building with landscaped grounds. Its residents, by and large, are reasonably well off, though hardly rich. Most were working people with steady jobs and comfortable salaries, though some were retirees on Social Security.

Both neighborhoods shared long, colorful histories and aging structures built before modern fire codes. After the fires, both sets of victims were reeling, identifiable at meetings by their tight lips and wide eyes. They spoke of the fire as something unbelievable that they were being forced to believe - as if they had just swallowed an object too big to fit down a throat.

"The things you work for all your life, ruined," said Darius T. Hengombe, a cable-television installer who immigrated from Namibia 20 years ago. On March 14, he and his wife and three children fled their Oak Street apartment and spent the night in his van, the motor running and the heater on, watching the firefighters' failing battle to save his and his neighbors' homes.

"You feel you're in a bad dream," he said. "But a few minutes later you think: 'It's real. It's happening. You've watched it on TV, happening to other people and now it's happening to you. It's really your life.' "

The first weeks, victims say, were intensely confusing and busy. Heads spinning, homeless and disoriented, they had even lost the tools to help them remember what to do, like computers, pens and date books. Yet they had more errands than even before: subsidies to pick up from the Red Cross for emergency housing and clothing; replacements for untold numbers of things to shop for; donated clothes and nonperishable food to collect; low-income housing aid to apply for; municipal employees, insurance adjusters and real-estate agents to meet with. As well as new routes to work and school to memorize - all while sharing tight quarters with friends and relatives.

"It's like being back in Africa," said Mr. Hengombe shortly after the fire, when he and his family were sharing the home of a friend, who also had a wife and several children. "Sleeping three and four to a room."

Three months after the fire, some people are still apartment-hunting. Some are staying with relatives and waiting. But most are shopping for furnishings, and hoping that the memories will soon fade. The memories intrude, especially at night. The feelings of safety and security they once took for granted have been badly shaken.

A few are too discouraged to even begin the house hunt. Anna Medina is one. Mrs. Medina, 61, from Puerto Rico, is staying in Wappinger's Falls with Natalie Otero, her daughter.

"She doesn't want to eat," said Mrs. Otero. "She can't sleep. She won't come out of her room."

This is the third time in 30 years that Mrs. Medina has lost her home and belongings to fire. At no point has she had any extra money for insurance, Mrs. Otero said.

But a couple of others, including Joe Aiello, a radio engineer at Voice of America in Manhattan, are exhilarated at the prospect of starting fresh. At first, Mr. Aiello stayed at the Marriott in White Plains, eating takeout and staring at the generic hotel walls. Gone were his nice apartment, friendly neighbors and - worst - his extensive collection of rock 'n' roll memorabilia: 30 years and tens of thousands of irreplaceable tapes: live concerts, on-air performances, interviews with John Lennon, Jerry Garcia and Bob Dylan. Mr. Aiello said he very rarely listened to any, but they anchored his life.

A few weeks after the destruction, he said: "You don't realize you can grieve over material things. But you grieve like they were living."

But a month or so later, his outlook had transformed. For the time being he is staying in his uncle's home in New Paltz. He feels, he said, free - unexpectedly but dizzily. His anchors have turned to ashes. Unbuoyed, he said, he is rethinking things.

OTHER unexpected silver linings have emerged. One was 200 additional Section 8 vouchers for the fire victims, a much sought-after state benefit that pays two-thirds of a low-income family's rent, and which ordinarily requires a minimum wait of five years.

Another is the newly accelerated pace of the city's efforts to improve Nodine Hill, based on plans started before March.

"The fire really made a difference," said Leslie Mantrone, who works for Westhab, a housing advocacy group. Before the Oak Street fire, only a handful of people were attending meetings of the new Nodine Hill neighborhood association. But afterward, there were 100 or more people coming. Best of all, she said, city officials have been meeting with and listening to Nodine Hill people.

"That's a major, major victory," she said. "People had felt that the city had written them off, as a crime-ridden neighborhood. Now the city is listening, really listening."

Though denying that the city was ever deaf to residents, Richard Haliby, a Yonkers spokesman, agreed that the city and Nodine Hill residents were cooperating for the first time in a long time. As a result, he said, residents will participate in plans to build and restore dozens of neighborhood homes.

"They have a real community neighborhood association," he said. "The city can't go in a just fix up a place by itself. It needs the help and cooperation of residents."

The third silver lining has been the introduction of the Rev. Debra Avery, pastor of Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church, an elegant old church with 80 members, to Nodine Hill. Ms. Avery, an Iowan who entered the ministry to pursue social justice, took over Good Shepherd more than two years ago. But in an area dominated by Latino Roman Catholics and African-American Baptists, Pentecostals and African Methodist Episcopal church members, few people knew who she was.

As it turned out, she was the only religious leader of the 300 churches, synagogues and temples in Yonkers to step forward and offer substantial help to the fire victims.

On the morning of the Nodine Hill fire, she threw open her church's doors, welcoming Red Cross volunteers, government and nonprofit housing advocates, cartloads of old clothes, toiletries and nonperishable food, and hundreds of victims who came and went for weeks, seeking help. She isn't done. She has collected \$40,000 for victims from individuals and from churches and civic groups throughout the New York metropolitan area. She is buying beds and matching up furniture donations with people who need them. She has also offered to let the new Nodine Hill neighborhood association use Good Shepherd as its headquarters.

These days, she said: "The phone rings a lot. The doorbell rings a lot. At first it was just the fire." Now she said, the fires "helped make a real strong connection with the community."

BUT the major chore of the fire was the overwhelming one of finding enough affordable homes for victims. Yonkers has few affordable rentals at any time, and the rest of Westchester County usually has even fewer.

Many of the people displaced were renting below market rates. Many Wakefield Tower residents were in subsidized apartments and Oak Street residents paid low rents because the area was rundown and the homes frequently in poor condition. Many residents were saving in the hopes of moving.

"That neighborhood," Mr. Hengombe said succinctly, "was no good."

The city publicized the need for affordable housing. Lincoln de los Santos, in the Fair Housing division in the mayor's office who was assigned to find vacant apartments for the victims, made calls to landlords and scouted the city in search of "for rent" signs.

Three months after the fire, most have found new apartments, but not all, especially those who refuse to return to Nodine Hill. And some of the newly housed dislike their homes and are still searching in the hopes of moving yet again.

The majority have improved their living conditions a bit, said Mr. de los Santos. But nearly all are paying substantially higher rents - and no wonder. Rents rose sharply after the fires.

"A lot of landlords took advantage," he said. "They doubled their rents. Landlords that were asking \$500 before wanted \$1,000. They knew how much in need we were of apartments. People were desperate at that time, going crazy trying to find apartments. And the landlords knew they could pay it, because they had Section 8 money."

Even though Section 8 subsidies pay two-thirds of the rent, rents rose so much that many subsidized residents are still spending more out of pocket on housing, he said.

Ms. Avery, too, saw a steep rise in rents. A landlord with a vacant apartment next to her church wanted \$600 for a one-bedroom apartment on the Thursday before the fire and \$900 the day after.

Gilbert Mercurio, the chief operating officer of the Westchester County Board of Realtors in White Plains said he had not heard about the rent increases in Yonkers. No weekly or monthly statistics on rental fees are kept, he said.

Wakefield Towers residents, too, are likely to have to pay more while getting less. Where will they be able to find affordable homes with extra-big rooms, cathedral ceilings and parquet floors? . Even the newest Wakefield Towers owners and renters, paying market rates, will be hard-pressed to find similar luxury for the price. And those in subsidized apartments, and owners who paid insider prices during the 80's, will undoubtedly see their housing costs increase steeply while the quality of their homes decline.

If the owners rebuild Wakefield Towers, residents will be able to return. Rent control and rent stabilization will remain in effect. Sheldon Becker of Bronx River Management, which owns the building, said that the insurance coverage of \$17 million is "adequate," that the damage is still being assessed and that the decision will be made within six months.

For Viola Daquila, who lived with her husband, Albert, in Wakefield Towers for 52 years, the wait will be nerve-racking. They were paying \$800 a month for a spacious one-bedroom, rent-controlled.

"It's like you're hanging, dislocated, you know?" she said. The Daquilas are currently staying with their daughter in Scarsdale, waiting for the management company's decision.

"I really, really miss it," she said. "I can't believe this happened. We're basically homeless. Who would think at 75 or 76, this could happen?"

Rosemary Connolly worries about neighbors like the Daquilas. "And Mrs. Russell - she had a slight heart attack after the fire. Agnes Murray - 65 years she lived there! The list goes on and on."

She recently moved into a \$950-a-month Bronxville apartment. She is trying to put Wakefield Towers behind her, without much success.

"Richie piped in music in the laundry room," she said, referring to the superintendent. "Everybody met in the laundry room. Old ladies sat outside on the lawn and talked - it was that kind of place."

Mr. Hengombe said his family moved from their friends' crowded quarters into a dark, tight apartment. He plans to keep looking for someplace better. Like nearly everyone else, he is shopping and saving to replace lost items. The Cruz family, immigrants from Mexico, lost their big, "almost new" desktop computer and the table it sat on. Their weekly income is \$996, said Maria Cruz, the 21-year-old daughter. Their new rent is \$1,300. She used the computer for her English lessons and to study for her G.E.D. The teen-age children, 13, 17 and 18, used it for homework. Since the Cruzes must first save for essential furniture, it is likely to be a long time before they are able to buy another computer, she said.

Jasmine Velez, who lost her family in the Nodine Hill fire, qualified for government housing subsidies and has moved into her own apartment, a roomy, pleasant place, said Lorraine Lopez, a special assistant to the mayor. Ms. Lopez knows all too well what the victims are going through: as a child growing up in Nodine Hill, her family's home was destroyed in fire. She said Ms. Velez has become an unofficial member of the mayor's office and will probably begin working there soon.

Others, including, perhaps, Mr. Aiello, will be making fundamental changes - finding new pastimes, new careers, new friends, as well as new housing. Years ago, Mr. Aiello said,

friends said he made them laugh uncontrollably and should be in front of the mike, rather than behind with the technicians. He is seriously thinking of using some money from insurance on acting lessons. Maybe he'll try to make a go of stand-up. And he might do some traveling abroad. And move to Manhattan. And scout around for a girlfriend.

"Damn it, everything's gone," he said. "So I'm like, 'Let's start over.' It's like rebooting a computer. You've lost all your memories. What do you do? You start over and maybe you do something better."