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## After the fire: Displaced families call recovery a slow, stressful ordeal

**BY MARY DIDUCH**

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Before a fire tore through David Maldonado's Paterson apartment last November, he considered his 2-year-old daughter the adventurous type, who even enjoyed the occasional, playful scare from her father.

But months after the blaze, the toddler jumps and starts breathing quickly when she hears a loud noise, like a rumbling truck or slamming door. Isabella also used to wake up daily, calling for her parents, at 5 a.m. sharp — the same time the family was awakened by that Thanksgiving morning fire.

"All of this happened right after the fire," said Maldonado.

There are many invisible wounds inflicted upon people displaced from their homes unexpectedly by fire — from children afraid to sleep alone, to adults receiving help as they struggle to regain their self-confidence. Families that have undergone the months-long process to rebuild their lives describe it as beyond overwhelming. Often, there are a jumble of insurance company bureaucracies to navigate, necessities to purchase, precious mementos to salvage and flashbacks to work through.

But despite the loss of the sense of security and material goods, some victims also say they are humbled by the support of the family, friends and complete strangers who have carried them over the months.

"My faith in God has gotten that much stronger," said Kevin Wilson, an Englewood firefighter who learned firsthand last June what it was like to lose his home in an instant.

Wilson recalled that as he was manning his post providing water to extinguish the blaze that had engulfed his two-story West Palisade Avenue home, he had to stop himself from running inside. It only took a half-hour to contain, and no one was hurt, "but it felt like three days."

"You don't think when you leave that morning that's the last time you will see your things," said Wilson, who had owned the two-family home for 20 years.

After the fire, Wilson and his 16-year-old son received donations from others in Englewood and offers to stay with relatives and friends. Ultimately, the Jabari Society of Bergen County, an organization for professional black firefighters, got them a room at a Teaneck hotel. A few weeks later, they moved into a temporary apartment in Englewood, where they are waiting to construct their



KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Englewood Firefighter Kevin Wilson responded to his own house fire last June but lost all that he had. "You don't think when you leave that morning that's the last time you will see your things," Wilson said.

new home. The dismantling process began last month, he said.

Wilson had home insurance, which was paid out after months of long, tedious inspections. Still, it was “sobering” to go shopping for basic necessities like toothpaste and underwear not because he had run out of them, but because he had no possessions.

But it showed him the severity of his loss and the unimportance of items he did not use regularly.

“I didn’t miss what I thought I’d miss,” Wilson said.

And many months after the fire, which was caused by an electrical malfunction, the professional firefighter said he won’t take certain necessities for granted — such as insurance and fire extinguishers.

Those thoughts occasionally bleed into his non-firefighting life, as well. At a New Year’s Day party at a friend’s house, he saw one of those common brown cords in use. His impulse was to pull it out of the wall and cut it up.

“I don’t want what happened to me to happen to you,” he recalled telling the friend.

The local American Red Cross assists victims of home fires more than those of any other disaster, said Diane Concannon, spokeswoman for the American Red Cross North Jersey Region.

The chapter responded to 494 home fires for part of 2013 and 2014, helping more than 1,130 displaced families, Concannon said.

Sometimes volunteers provide temporary lodging, food, clothing, medication or referrals for longer-term assistance.

Volunteers also will give families simple advice like reminding them that they will need thick rubber boots and big buckets when they return to retrieve what isn’t covered in ash or sludge.

“Unless you’ve experienced a home fire, you don’t experience that,” Concannon said.

In the aftermath, officials from the offices of emergency management in towns also help fire victims find permanent housing. This year, for instance, the city of Passaic had four fires in 24 hours, displacing dozens of families, said Walter Porto, the city’s emergency management coordinator.

Andy Krupa, who grew up in Passaic County and volunteers with the Red Cross, said it is important for those who are uprooted to accept help from others, even if all they want to do is withdraw.

Krupa, his wife and two young sons were displaced by a fire in their Livingston home four years ago. They struggled emotionally — dealing with a constant parade of fire inspectors, contractors and insurance agents as they began rebuilding their home. Simple tasks — like boiling water to make dinner or going to the store — were tough. But they gained strength from neighbors.

“It feels like you’re never going to get back in your house,” said Krupa’s wife, Margaret. “There’s a silver lining, and everything is going to be OK.”

Now, when Krupa teaches first-aid classes, he can share his personal experience to better prepare others.

“I feel the emotion when I’m talking about different things in those situations, and I try to prepare people for the psychological impact of it,” he said.

Paterson fire victims Maldonado and his wife, Frances Calderon, shared the apartment in the two-story Totowa Avenue building that burned to the ground with Calderon’s sister, Mariela Medina, and her three young children. The family was the only residential tenant in the building, which housed a bodega on the bottom floor. In the aftermath, the couple struggled to get help from various organizations and social services programs within the city.

“I wouldn’t wish this on nobody, I wouldn’t. ... We started from scratch,” Calderon said.

Maldonado and Calderon did not have renter’s insurance. They did not qualify for loans to cover expenses. They had just moved — unpacking their last box two days before the fire occurred — and he said that purchasing insurance was next on their to-do list.

“The fire got to us first,” said Maldonado, adding the cause of the fire was never determined. He noted that the couple now has insurance for their new, much smaller, 1½-bedroom apartment. It was at the top of the list when they moved into a new place.

The difficulty in getting government aid disappointed the young family greatly, as Maldonado works for the school district and is a frequent volunteer. They used every penny they had for a \$3,000 deposit to move into a new apartment on Beech Street in Paterson

in December after being scattered among relatives for weeks. Maldonado resorted to pawning many items — like his laptop — to get such basic necessities as milk and bread for his wife and baby.

During the winter, he visited the old apartment several times a week to salvage what he could, working in the cold until his fingers were blue, airing out the items — to rid them of the lingering smell of smoke — in the doorway of his new apartment before bringing them inside. The old apartment had been robbed four times, with thieves taking valuable electronics and other items that survived the fire, he said.

The family was tested again last week, Maldonado said, when pipes in the vacant second floor above them burst in the cold and flooded their apartment, damaging their bathroom and kitchen.

“A man is responsible for his family no matter what happens. I am braver and stronger and more prepared,” Maldonado said.

But the couple said they are most thankful for the help they received from their family and church and the roof over their heads as they save money to move out of Paterson. And Isabella’s sleep patterns have started improving recently, with the help of a specialist.

Calderon’s sister and three children, however, remain homeless, staying in a shelter until they can find a permanent place.

“I learned to be grateful for what you have,” Calderon said. “There is always someone in a worse situation than you.”

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