

Manorhaven Man, 51, Dies in Suspicious Fire

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STAFF WRITER

A fire that authorities described as suspicious took the life of a 51-year-old Manorhaven man early yesterday and gutted the house where he lived with three tenants who escaped the blaze.

Neil Capobianco died in a fire that started at about 2:30 a.m. and took 75 firefighters 66 minutes to extinguish, said Nassau police and Port Washington Fire Chief Geoffrey Cole. The three tenants and three firefighters were treated for minor injuries, Cole said.

Sgt. William Cocks, a Nassau police homicide detective, said the fire, which apparently started on the first floor, was considered suspicious at least partly because it spread so rapidly. He said police were investigating reports of a possible dispute before the incident, though it wasn't clear between whom or over what.

Capobianco lived on the first floor of the two-story wooden house on Edgewood Road and the tenants lived in two rooms on the second floor, said one tenant, who identified himself only as Raul.

Raul, 18, said he and tenant Melvin Cruz, 21, were unable to help Capobianco after they escaped.

Once outside, he said, they heard Capobianco yelling for help. He said Cruz ran around the side of the house and cut his hand breaking Capobianco's window. But flames shot out and he couldn't get to Capobianco.

"The only words I heard him say were, 'Help me,'" Ramirez said. "But we couldn't help him. It was too late."

Cocks, who's investigating the incident along with the arson squad and fire marshal's officials, said preliminary autopsy findings showed Capobianco likely died of smoke inhalation.

The third tenant to escape the blaze was Raul's girlfriend, 22-year-old Solange Ramirez. A visitor also managed to escape.

Raul said he and Ramirez had been in bed for just a couple of minutes when they heard Cruz yelling "Fire!"

"On the stairs, it was all fire," Raul said. He said he opened the curtained entryway to another room and "smoke hit my face."

Raul, Ramirez, Cruz and the visitor all jumped out a front window onto a roof over the porch, then into the front yard, Raul and Ramirez recounted. She was afraid to jump down to the ground, so he had to push her and she landed in a bush, they said.

Raul, Ramirez and neighbors described Capobianco, who they said owned a Manorhaven deli and ran a food concession in Queens, as a friendly, fatherly figure.

Raul described Capobianco as a "nice, hard-working man who used to get up every day at three for work."

A neighbor, Angela Massari, said that Capobianco and her son had gone to school together and that Capobianco grew up in the area. She said he "came from a good family" and was "very good to kids, anything for kids."

"I can't believe it. I'm shocked," she said. "... Who would do something like this?"

Raul said he met Capobianco through Raul's cousins. Cruz lived in the house about eight months and Raul lived there about six months, with Ramirez joining him later, Raul said.

"We lost everything, but we mostly lost Neil," said Ramirez yesterday as her mother comforted her. "We had a family," she said, "and there were four of us and one of us is gone."

'The only words I heard him say were, "Help me." But we couldn't help him. It was too late.'

—Tenant Solange Ramirez

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