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'No Greater Pain'

Woman Grieves Death of Daughter, 5,
In Port Washington Fire

Blaze Also Takes Life of Her Mother

Melissa Castillo, who died in fire
called suspicious by police.

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LONG ISLAND

Blaze Kills Girl, Woman; 4 Hurt

*Inferno guts two-family house
termed suspicious by officials*

By Ching-Ching Ni

STAFF WRITER

A 5-year-old girl who loved to eat spaghetti and an unidentified woman believed to be her mother are dead after a monstrous fire gutted their Port Washington house late Friday night, fire officials said.

Flames were roaring out of the roof and windows when firefighters rushed to the two-story, two-family house at 11 Bernard St. at about 11:46 p.m. Rescuers dragged young Melisa Castillo and a 60-year-old woman believed to be her grandmother out of the inferno from their second-floor bedroom.

The girl was pronounced dead at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset. The older woman is in critical condition at St. Francis Hospital in Roslyn.

A third victim, believed to be the girl's mother, was found badly burned at the bottom of the stairway leading to the third-floor dormer, said First Assistant Chief James Interdonati of the Port Washington Fire Department. The woman was pronounced dead at the scene.

As of yesterday afternoon, officials were still searching through the rubble looking for two people who may be unaccounted for, Interdonati said. Nassau police said that four people were injured but that they were not identified. Officials said they did not know how

many people were in the house.

Fire officials are still investigating the cause, which they said was suspicious. Nine trucks put out the blaze in about two hours. "The wind and the snow were blowing in our direction, and that hampered our efforts," Interdonati said. "It was very cold. Everything was freezing up."

Neighbors said the family occupying the first floor had escaped.

Fire officials have not released the women's names. Neighbors said Melisa's mother's name was Patricia, as did Maria Bernal, who had babysat for Melisa since she was 8-months-old. Until she was ready for kindergarten, Melisa spent her days at Bernal's house while both her mother and grandmother worked as housekeepers, Bernal said.

"She loved to eat spaghetti, play on the swing, and she loved cats," Bernal said in Spanish through an interpreter. "I feel deeply sad. She was the first girl I took care of. My heart is tight. I feel the pain."

The girl's father, who does not live with the family, came by the scene yesterday afternoon in tears. He declined comment.

Neighbors poured out onto the streets yesterday to survey the damage and trade the little information they knew about the family.

"I used to live on the first floor,"



Melisa Castillo, shown at a babysitter's house, was among the victims of a house fire Friday.

said Rosa Mejia, who had rented an apartment in the same house a few years ago. "The family is from El Salvador. I used to see the grandmother walking around taking the bus to

clean houses."

"My niece is in the same kindergarten class," said Reina Ulloa. "She was crying when she heard what happened."

A Fireman's View of Fatal Fire on Bernard Street

Port Washington firefighter (and police officer) Tony Guzzello snapped these photos the night of February 2 in the fire that claimed the lives of three. The Nassau County Homicide Bureau and Arson Squad, after five days of investigation, reported that the fire was set "with something less volatile than gasoline" that was poured between the first and second floor landing of the house on Bernard Street.



Atlantic Hook & Ladder lowered its equipment into the top floor windows.



The Calderon family of five escaped without harm and three upstairs tenants jumped out the second story window to safety. However, it was too late for Melissa Castillo and her grandmother Blanca Saravia and Rosa Villatoro.



All for one and one for all while holding the hose on the sub-freezing ground.



Firefighter Chris Bollerman's serious intensity was the order of the night.

Photos by Tony Guzzello



Flames lick out from the top story.