

Port Washington NEWS

Serving the Communities of Port Washington, Sands Point, Baxter Estates, Port Washington North, Flower Hill and Manorhaven

Vol. 62, No. 2

Thursday, August 18, 1994

50 Cents

Fire Kills Edgewood Road Resident

Suspicious Fire Makes Youths Homeless Again

By Christina Cronin Southard

Fifteen callers jammed the Port Washington Fire Department's dispatch lines at 2:38 a.m. last Friday to report a house fire at 60 Edgewood Road. When the fire department arrived, "the fire was fully involved," said Port Washington Fire Chief Geoff Cole. Neal Capobianco, 51, owner of the house, could not escape the flames and died. Four others in the house escaped. The fire is under investigation by the Nassau County Fire Marshal and the Nassau County Homicide Department.

According to Cole, over 70 firefighters worked to put out the fire and it was under control by 3:44 a.m.

According to the neighbors, shortly after 2:30 a.m., Solange Ramirez, 22, a young woman who was staying at Mr. Capobianco's house screamed, "Help me! Somebody help me! Nealie's inside!" The woman and three males, who were all staying on the second floor, escaped out the front window onto the roof and into the bushes. Mr. Capobianco was sleeping on the first floor, where, according to Nassau County Fire Marshal Steve Wenk, the fire started. The youths were yelling "Get out! Get out!" It is not known at this time whether Mr. Capobianco died from injuries from the fire or from smoke inhalation. One of the neighbors who arrived just after the fire started said you could hear Mr. Capobianco screaming for help; but the house was in full blaze and impossible to enter.

According to neighbors, the house belonged to Mr.



FIREFIGHTERS from the Port Washington Volunteer Fire Department had the fire fully under control in less than an hour. Although they were called to the scene almost immediately after the blaze began, the fire accelerated rapidly and Mr. Capobianco was unable to escape. At right, the morning after, police stayed on the premises to question the boarders who were shocked and dazed. Four tenants barely escaped out the second story window.

Capobianco's parents, O'Neal and Carmela Capobianco, and he took over the house after their deaths. Mr. Capobianco owned a delicatessen on Manorhaven Boulevard that closed about two years ago. According to neighbors, Mr. Capobianco had been taking in boarders for several years. Most of them were troubled youths who were

homeless or needy. Some said he charged them \$50 a week for rent. "He opened up both his heart and his house to anyone who was in trouble," said a woman who did not wish to be identified.

Several neighbors described him as a Vietnam veter-

(continued on page 24)

Fire

(continued from page 1)

an who never fully recovered from the effects of war. He usually wore an old flak jacket and his deli was bedecked with war memorabilia. "He never got beyond his Vietnam experience," said one sympathetic neighbor.

Vinnie Dello-Iaconno, a lifelong friend of Mr. Capobianco's, said, "Nealie was always kind and tried to help out all kids who had problems. He had a big heart and hated to see anyone suffer and reached out to anyone who was hurting. That's just how he lived his life," he said.

Although the hundreds who watched in horror while the house burned to the ground and were shocked by the death, some did not waste time telling of how Mr. Capobianco's presence on the block caused a lot of problems. Just a week ago, the house was the site of a drug overdose and two years ago Mike Chivola, a friend of Mr. Capobianco, committed suicide by hanging himself in the basement. As one young man who did not wish to be identified said, "The cancer in our neighborhood is now gone." Manorhaven Mayor Gary Pagano, who was away at the time of the fire, said in a telephone interview, "I knew Neal and he was a nice guy and although people who knew him for a long time would speak to him about his lifestyle and how it impacted on the neighborhood, he was completely resistant to change. This is a tragic end."

The three youths who were in the house at the time of the fire stood in the street in their underwear while they watched along with the hundreds of

Manorhaven residents who came out to watch and pray. Finally, one young woman from the neighborhood brought some sweatshirts and pants to one of the youths who stood there shaking convulsively with fear and grief. Two of the youths who escaped refused medical attention but were transported to the hospital several hours later. The homes on either side of the Capobianco house were evacuated and covered with water by the fire department to protect them from radiant heat. According to Cole, the fire was so intense that some of the siding on the adjacent homes melted. "It was a lot of fire for a house," said Cole. "The power lines were jumping and everyone had to be very careful."

A special dog from the Canine Unit was brought to the scene to sniff out any fire accelerants at the scene. According to Nassau County Fire Marshal Steve Wenk, the fire is under investigation due to the rapidity of the blaze. Neighbors also reported a disturbance outside just before the fire started.

Father Rosales, a priest from Our Lady of Fatima, was called to the scene by a neighbor and administered last rites to Mr. Capobianco. After exiting from the house, he walked over to the dazed youths who had barely escaped hugged them and then blessed what little was left of the two-story house that once stood at 60 Edgewood Road.

Mr. Capobianco is survived by a brother, Carlo, and two sisters Joan Gembel and Angela Capobianco. Services were held at St. Peter of Alcantara.