

Fire At Wildwood Gardens Displaces 15

By Christina Cronin Southard

At 4:27 p.m., a fire was reported at 12 Wildwood Gardens, the apartment complex just east of Soundview Marketplace. According to Port Washington Volunteer Fire Department Chief Geoff Cole, 90 firefighters on 11 pieces of fire apparatus responded to the scene. The fire was under control at 5:50 p.m. Two apartments were totally burned and gutted. Two other apartments had severe smoke and water damage and four additional ones had smoke damage only. All of the tenants that had any damage were left without homes. The fire started in the downstairs corner apartment of Building 12, which is in the center of the garden apartment complex.

"We did a terrific job in that there were no deaths or injuries and they were able to contain the fire damage to two of the 16 apartments in the building," said Cole.

According to investigator Frank Sokolski of the Nassau County Fire Marshal's Office, "The fire was started by a juvenile playing with some type of open flame. There were three separate fires set by a 5-year-old boy in different rooms of the same apartment," said Sokoloski.

According to Det. Steve Cardello of the Port Washington Police Department, Mrs. Helen Suh had taken her 3-year-old out and left the 5-year-old child alone in the apartment. Another older sibling was at a friend's house. A neighbor, teacher Riki Sokol, who lives in an adjoining building, smelled smoke and left her apartment and followed the odor. She then noticed that the door to the child's apartment was ajar. She saw flames and got the child out of the building. The mother said that she left the apartment to direct a lost delivery person to her apartment. She was standing on Soundview Drive waiting for the truck when the fire broke out. Apparently, there was a debate between the fire marshal and the mother of the five-year-old suspect. She claimed that her son had no access to any matches or any flammable substances. The Fire Marshal stated that the principal fire of the three set, was in the bedroom.

According to Wildwood Gardens owner and manager, Steve Spivack, 15 tenants were left homeless in a total of eight apartments. "When I arrived about 5:15 p.m.,



These apartments on the first and second floor of the Wildwood Gardens, a garden apartment complex on Soundview Drive, were gutted in the late afternoon fire last Thursday.

flames were 20 feet in the air," said Spivack. "Amazingly, no one was hurt." Most of the families had relatives and friends' homes to go to. The Suh family stayed in Port Washington and another went to Jericho and another to Great Neck, said Spivack. According to the local chapter of the Nassau County Red Cross, the Suh's were provided with financial assistance. They were given \$600 for clothing. Other families are also eligible for assistance.

The fire received much media attention, including two network television stations. "That was because of the 'Home Alone' aspect of the story," said Spivack, referring to the popular movie of the same name in which a boy causes a lot of mischief when he is left behind by his unwitting parents. "It was determined that he was alone for about 15 minutes," stated Spivack.

"The fire and police departments were completely heroic," said Spivack. "They controlled the blaze and kept the whole place from going up in flames."

The damage has not yet been assessed and Spivack is working with insurance companies on replacement costs. "It is one of the tragedies that you hope never happens, but it is especially difficult on these families around the holidays," said Spivack. Spivack was particularly concerned about Esther Kleinfeld, an elderly widow, who was displaced and extremely upset by the trauma. One of the other tenants was on a Caribbean vacation and flew back when she heard the news.

Wildwood Gardens is a 30-year-old complex of 16 two-story buildings that house 250 apartments. The case has been referred to the juvenile authorities and the Child Care Protective Services.

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