

# Port Washington NEWS

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## Port Fire: Gallant Efforts Amidst Chaos

By Andrea Martone

A fire that began on the roof of the Sands Point Nursing Home on Tuesday, Nov. 19, forced the evacuation of 124 patients, many of whom were frail or gravely ill, and launched a massive community rescue effort that was both successful and impressive.

At 7:15 p.m. repeated fire alarms sounded throughout town while the staff and passersby at the Sands Point Nursing Home on Port Washington Blvd. began frantically to transfer the elderly patients from their bedrooms to the outdoor parking lot of the facility. With Atlantic Hook and Ladder a short distance down the block on Avenue A, and the Fire Medics just around the corner, the response was brief and firefighters and Medics joined in the rescue efforts, breaking in hospital beds and wheelchairs.

While firefighters brought the fire in control within 15 minutes, volunteers had the arduous task of locating blankets to keep the patients warm in the cold night air to avoid hypothermia and maintaining I.V.s for many of the patients who needed acute care. In addition, as part of the Fire Department's Disaster Plan, the patients were "triaged", or medically evaluated and tagged.

Two of the volunteers who live a block away from the nursing home, ran to the scene to offer assistance. Karen Tomassi, 36, a home health aide, and her boyfriend, Robert O'Keefe, both assisted in moving the bulky hospital beds, many of which had wheels that kept falling off. "I wasn't nervous at all," says Tomassi who is used to working with the elderly. "I helped put oxygen masks on those patients who needed it because of the smoke and comforted some who were frightened and confused. All I cared about was getting those patients out. It wasn't until I got home that I called my mother and began to cry!"

Meanwhile, the Port Washington Fire Dept. summoned fire assistance, supplies and manpower from 23 Fire Companies throughout Long Island to assist in the rescue efforts. 32 ambulances were brought in including help from the Nassau County Police and the Red Cross. According to Port Fire Medics, one of the biggest concerns was locating enough blankets to keep the patients warm before they were transferred to another facility. Although temperatures were mild for the season, most of the patients were scantily dressed given their bedtime hour, and were susceptible to sickness. Within an hour, patients began to be moved by ambulance to the Weber Jr. High cafeteria, one of several disaster sites in Port Washington. Assisting in the move was Brower's Moving Company, a 78 year old Port-based company located down the block from the nursing home. Using two large moving vans, wheel-

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FIREFIGHTERS AND CITIZENS joined together in their courageous effort to successfully evacuate all 124 patients from the Sands Point Nursing Home after a fire broke out on the roof of the building shortly after 7 p.m. Other than a few patients who suffered from trauma, there were no casualties. Photo by Andrea Martone

## Triage To Transfer: "Flawless"

By Andrea Martone

"It was one of the most impressive community efforts I have ever experienced," said Port Police Chief Frank Donahue. "I can only describe it as flawless."

"The response from the Port firefighters, police and community was phenomenal," said Rayanne Havasay who walked into Weber from the street and assisted throughout the evening. "It was an incredibly moving experience for me."

"We had the mild weather in our favor," says Dr. Carole Moodhe, Chief resident of Internal Medicine at North Shore Hospital and a Port resident who was called to the scene by North Shore Hospital officials. "The medics, fire and police departments were excellent. However, it was still traumatic for the patients who were uprooted twice in the same evening."

The above statements reflected the opinions of many observers and volunteer

workers who were at the Weber scene the night of the fire, and witnessed the massive efforts that were made in response to the fire disaster that forced the evacuation of over 100 frail and sick patients from their beds at the nursing home.

Ironically, the Disaster Plan that went into effect by the Port Washington volunteer Fire Department the night of the fire, was one they were familiar with. As part of the Fire Department's "incident command system" practiced one year ago, the Sands Point Nursing Home was used as a model should a fire disaster occur. "We knew right away to contact Brower's Moving Company for assistance, to call for supplies from neighboring fire companies and to locate the group at Weber, one of several sites throughout Port Washington designated for such a disaster," says Fire Chief Guff Cole.

Aided by nine Red Cross volunteers who brought supplies and provided sandwiches

for all emergency workers, along with Port's Fire Medics who maintained the I.V.s, administered oxygen and treated patients for hypothermia, the rescue effort was truly a cohesive one that was marked by only two medical emergencies. According to North Shore Hospital sources, two elderly patients went into cardiac arrest and one diabetic suffered from insulin shock. All were transported immediately by ambulance to St. Francis Hospital.

Once the nursing home patients arrived at Weber's scene, the Fire Department "triaged" the group a second time to determine their medical needs. Healthier patients sat in wheelchairs in the hallway where Weber teacher David Katz, a volunteer at the scene, set up the video *Fiddler On The Roof* on a television screen for their entertainment. Other patients in exceedingly poor condition were attended to in hospital beds that lined

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## Fire (continued from page 1)

chairs and beds were transported from the nursing home parking lot to Weber cafeteria. Brower's continued to assist throughout the evening and early morning, transporting beds to the North Shore Hospital which accepted many of the patients at four sites on their campus.

According to the Fire Chief Geoff Cole who confirmed the fire's origin, the fire was a result of "careless use of a torch by roofers," who were working earlier that day. Cole added that the fire produced minimal structural damage and only a moderate amount of smoke and water damage inside. The nursing home staff and administration were busily preparing to clean up the morning after the fire in anticipation of readmitting their patients. Nassau County and New York State Health officials, however, were critical of the

nursing home's hopes for patient readmittance saying that a review is needed of the evacuation plan the home was required to keep on file, as well as the emergency training plan given its employees.

Many questions surround the home's inability to produce a master list of patients after the fire broke out or their failure to call a doctor throughout the evening. Doctors who assisted were either local residents who volunteered spontaneously or sent from North Shore Hospital when the hospital's own Disaster Plan went into effect.

*Editor's Note: At press time, nursing home patients were being readmitted to the Sands Point Nursing Home following the fire on Tuesday, Nov. 19. See next week's issue for further details and a feature story.*

## Weber (continued from page 1)

the cafeteria.

Coordination of volunteers was necessary, and as luck would have it residents Debi Miano and Stephani Schwartz were conducting a CPR class at nearby Flower Hill school and rushed to the scene to offer their help. Through their efforts, along with friend Rayanne Havasy, the three devoted their time to recording the names of all the patients, calling all the different hospitals and nursing homes to track the whereabouts of patients once they were removed from Weber in the wee hours of the morning. In addition, the three kept the families of the patients calm and informed. Many families of the elderly patients began arriving at the scene after hearing the news of the fire on the 11 o'clock news. "The families were more upset than the patients themselves," says Stephani

Shwartz who was glued to a school district phone in the teacher's lounge. "For some patients, it was a real party," Havasy adds. "One 87-year old woman said to me, 'my dear, do you know how long it's been since I've been in a school cafeteria?', and her eyes sparkled all night!" Another patient commented, "is that real milk?" when she saw coffee being distributed to volunteers. Miano said that she was moved by the outpouring of help from civilians walking in off the streets, many of whom brought donuts, juice, and snacks for the hundreds of workers.

After determining where the patients would be temporarily housed, County buses, ambulances and "anything that could be used to transport patients" were used to transport the patients. According to Alice Siegel, a community relations person from North Shore Hospital, 64 of the patients

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**BANKRUPTCY**

# 119 EVACUATED FROM SANDS POINT NURSING HOME FIRE

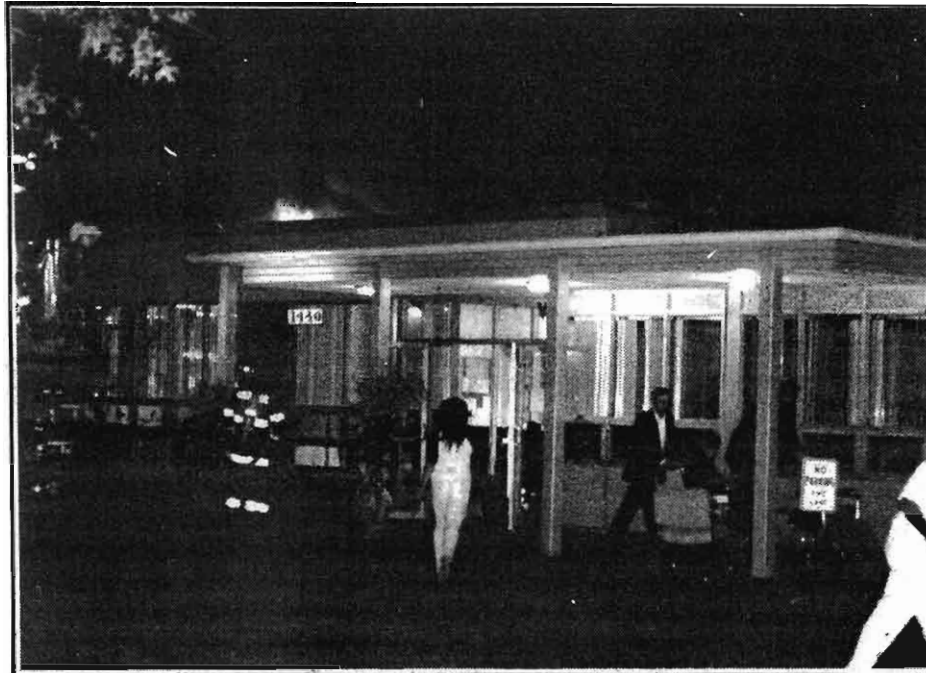
By Alice M. Peckelis

A fire that erupted on the roof of the Sands Point Nursing Home early in the evening of November 21 forced the evacuation of 119 persons from the facility. There were no fatalities.

According to Geoffrey Cole, first assistant chief of the Port Washington Fire Department, the fire broke out shortly after 7:00 p.m. on the roof of the nursing home located at 1440 Port Washington Boulevard. The Port Washington Fire Department was on the scene at 7:15 p.m. and the fire was deemed under control by 7:35 p.m.

Cole said roofers had been working on the roof earlier in the day and rubbish left on the roof from their activities ignited. Further investigation reveals the fire possibly started as a result of a butane torch left burning. The fire is not deemed suspicious. The building sustained smoke and water damage as well as damage to the roof, but it is not considered serious. The nursing home is expected to reopen within a few days after State officials complete a safety inspection.

However, the logistics of evacuating 119 frail and elderly nursing home patients, many of whom are confined to beds and wheelchairs, proved a formidable task. All in all, over 300 firefighters



Fire erupts on the roof of the Sands Point Nursing Home forcing the evacuation of 119 residents from the facility on Port Washington Boulevard.

from 23 fire departments on Long Island were on the scene, including all four fire companies of the Port Washington Fire Department: Protection Engine Company, Flower Hill Hose Company, Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company and the Fire Medics. Assistance was also provided by the Port Washington Police and the Nassau County Police Department.

Ninety-two people were brought to

the Weber Junior High School cafeteria where they were triaged. The rest, who were in need of more immediate medical care, were brought to area hospitals. By about 5:30 a.m. all of the patients had been moved out of Weber Junior High to other facilities.

Two people went into cardiac arrest and had to be resuscitated; others were suffering from various degrees of

trauma. One firefighter, Frank Scobbo, Jr. was taken to Syosset Hospital where he was treated for smoke inhalation and released.

Sixty-four patients were admitted to North Shore University Hospital's Manhasset and Glen Cove campuses where they were listed in stable condition, including four in the intensive care unit. Eight were admitted to St. Francis Hospital and were also listed in stable condition. Patients were also admitted to other hospitals and some were released to relatives.

Criticism has been leveled at the Sands Point Nursing Home for not having an evacuation plan and for the mass of confusion which ensued afterwards.

Dr. Carol Moody, a Port resident, who arrived on the scene to volunteer her services at Weber Jr. High, said there was no one in charge and for several hours she was the only physician in attendance.

Dr. John Imhof, staff administrator for mental health services at North Shore University Hospital, also a Port resident, said he likewise was concerned about the lack of a disaster plan and the chaotic scene he encountered. He said he was on duty at the hospital but decided to go to the scene when he was unable to contact

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## Nursing Home Fire

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anyone at Weber Junior High to determine what kind of assistance would be required of the hospital. Imhof described a scene of mass confusion with no one in charge, no command center, only one telephone, and no physician from 11:30 p.m. to 3 a.m. He added there was no plan for the care and disposition of the the nursing home residents.

Imhof also criticized Gerald Hirsch, an administrator for Sands Point Nursing Home, who did not want to release the medical charts of the nursing home residents when they were sent to the hospitals. He was finally persuaded to do so.

When Sands Point Nursing Home was asked to comment about the fire, a woman answering the phone said every one was too busy to talk to the press.

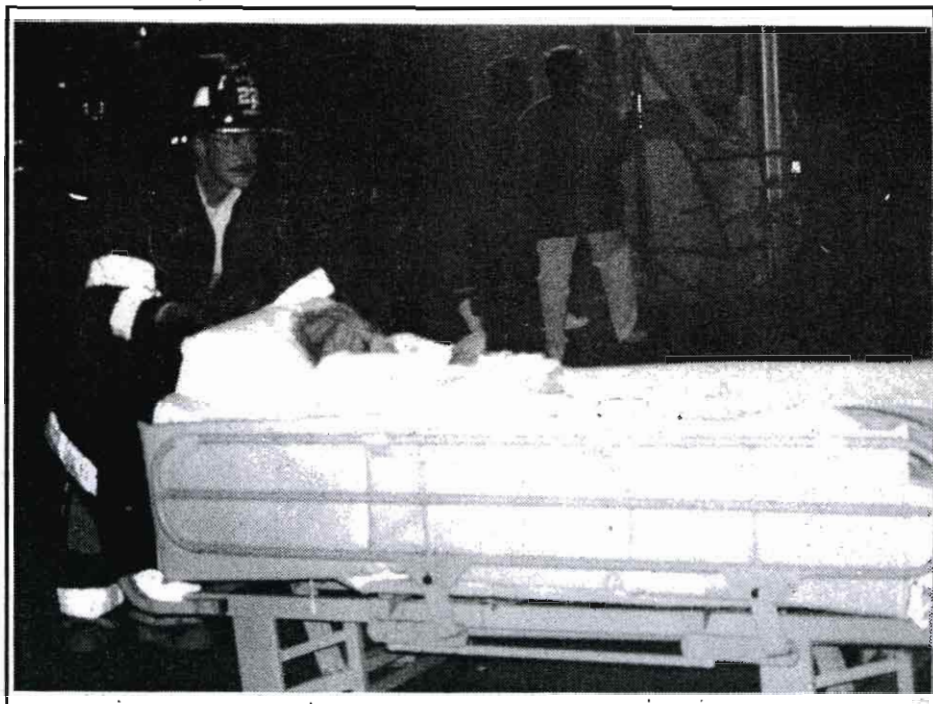
A former employee of the nursing home, who asked not to be identified, said they never conducted any fire drills.

Despite the confusion and

communication failure, Imhof had nothing but praise for the members of the fire and police departments who were willing to render whatever assistance was needed. He was especially grateful for the help of a Port Washington Police officer who stayed with him the entire night and helped him in any way he could. He said members of the police and fire departments were "outstanding and dedicated" bringing honor to themselves and their departments.

Imhof added that he felt the experience would be "ultimately helpful" since it demonstrated the need for more coordination among emergency services personnel.

However, Ann Croce, the Town of North Hempstead's disaster representative, who was on the scene all night along with Supervisor Benjamin Zwim, said that given the conditions, things ran fairly smoothly. Croce, who is also a registered nurse, assisted in the treatment of the patients and said that patients received adequate medical care. Although she felt there is room for improvement in terms of setting up



Firefighter evacuates resident from the Sands Point Nursing Home during fire.

better communications in the future, she had nothing but praise for everyone who pitched in and helped. She singled out

the Port Fire Medics for the outstanding job they did coordinating the medical care of the nursing home residents.