

Residents rebuild and recover after fire



Susan Thorne and Kristin Pietrowicz jumped 25 feet from their balcony during a fire at their apartment complex in Colonial Village at Highland Hills on Sept. 30. Both sustained foot and spine injuries, and one woman died.

Apartment blazes displaced dozens

BY SARAH FRIER
STAFF WRITER

Kelli Gaskill said she woke up when her dining room windows shattered from the heat. Kristen Pietrowicz said she woke up when her curtains illuminated with flames.

Early in the morning of Sept. 30, residents of Carrboro's Colonial Village at Highland Hills saw their apartments go up in flames. Twenty lost their homes.

Two women, Pietrowicz and Susan Thorne, were forced to jump off their balcony and sustained serious foot and spine injuries. And one woman, 55-year-old Gloria Ines Suarez, died.

The residents of Highland Hills, and others displaced by the string of apartment fires that struck Orange County at the end of the year, have spent the past few months rebuilding and recovering from the loss of their homes.

Still, the Highland Hills fire was unique.

"In the history of the Carrboro fire department, that fire would rank in the top five," Deputy Chief Trey Mayo said. "That's about a hundred-year history."

When the fire ripped through, roommates Thorne and Pietrowicz said they had no choice but to jump off their balcony. Although they survived, both shattered their feet and injured their spines.

Both women are wheelchair-dependent until recovery — a

vague timeline, which depends on the body's ability to heal. On Jan. 2, Thorne's last cast was removed.

"I feel like I should be able to get up and walk, but that wouldn't be a good idea," she said. "They have these medical boots — they look like ski boots — on my feet now."

Thorne is undergoing physical therapy for her injuries and said she hopes to return to her teaching job at Chapel Hill High School when she can walk again. She said her doctor told her she'll have severe arthritis in both feet.

Suarez is survived by her son, Juan Arango, a UNC student.

She worked as a translator for the Program on Integrative Medicine at the UNC School of Medicine and was known for her dedication to the health and well-being of those in need.

She also was involved in mission work with orphans in Mexico and Honduras.

The building burned for 20 minutes before the fire department was notified, causing too much damage for fire investigators to determine a cause.

"It's a reasonably old building with an open attic, an open crawl space, wood exterior and no sprinklers," Mayo said. "It's constructed in such a way that makes it easy for fire to communicate through it."

And as fire investigators strug-

"It's hard. It's still hard at times, and I just try not to think about it."

KELLI GASKILL SURVIVOR OF SEPTEMBER FIRE AT CARRBORO'S COLONIAL VILLAGE AT HIGHLAND HILLS APARTMENT COMPLEX

gled to find evidence of a cause, victims said they've struggled to rebuild their lives.

"I got out with jeans, a T-shirt, and two dogs," Gaskill said.

Gaskill didn't have renter's insurance to provide financial support after the fire.

A little more than three months later, with full-time employment and help from the community, she has a car, a triplex and a bed.

"I've got nothing else as far as furniture is concerned, but I'm pretty much settled," she said. "You do what you have to do. The main thing is I'm pretty sad still about losing my cat."

When Gaskill bought her new apartment, she said she made sure it came equipped with several smoke detectors and bought another one just in case.

She said she wants to know immediately if another fire starts, and the memory is not something she wants to relive.

"It's hard. It's still hard at times, and I just try not to think about it."

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