



A firefighter tames the blaze at Ashbrook Apartments in Carrboro on Nov. 29. Another fire struck Colonial Village at Highland Hills in September.

Fires kill 2, displace residents

Delay, lack of sprinklers were factors

BY ELISABETH ARRIERO
ASSISTANT CITY EDITOR

Two major apartment fires in Carrboro in 2007, one at Colonial Village at Highland Hills and another at Ashbrook Apartments, collectively left 46 residents displaced, two injured and one dead.

Carrboro Fire-Rescue Chief Travis Crabtree said delay in response time and the lack of an indoor sprinkler system led to the rapid escalation of both fires.

"This makes a huge difference when you consider that every minute, a burning fire doubles in size," he said.

On Sept. 30, a fire spread quickly through an apartment at Colonial Village at Highland Hills on BPW Club Road in Carrboro. By the time rescuers had arrived, a large part of the 14-unit G building already was destroyed.

"There was a 30-minute delay on the fire department being notified," Crabtree said. "By the time we got there, four units had

already collapsed."

The fire claimed the life of 55-year-old Gloria Ines Suarez, a UNC employee. Two other residents, roommates Susan Thorne and Kristin Pietrowicz, sustained serious spinal and foot injuries after jumping 25 feet from their balcony during the fire. Twenty residents were displaced by the fire.

Three months later, Pietrowicz said that only recently was she told by her doctors that she could begin standing and walking again.

"(Thorne and I have) both been in wheelchairs this whole time," Pietrowicz said. "Now we have walkers, and we are going to need to work up to walking on our own again."

Pietrowicz, who has since moved back to Ohio, said the fire changed her perspective on life. "I've had a lot of time to read and think about what's really important," she said.

A Nov. 28 fire in Carrboro caused extensive damage to an Ashbrook Apartments building on Jones Ferry Road. The fire — which originated in

the 15-unit J building — destroyed four units, heavily damaged four other units and moderately damaged the seven remaining units.

"The damage was extensive because no one at the apartment knew the building was on fire since the fire was burning on the back side of the building," Crabtree said. "It took a call from people in a residential area behind the apartment complex to notify dispatch."

All 26 residents of the building were safely evacuated, though three emergency personnel sustained minor injuries.

A 1997 amendment to Carrboro town code requires that apartments containing three or more units be equipped with a sprinkler system. But units built before 1997 are not subject to this amendment. That exempted both the Highland Hills and Ashbrook Apartments.

"To retrofit existing apartments would be both difficult and expensive because it's closed construction," said Michael Canova, a Carrboro code enforcement supervisor.

Fire also claimed the life of a Hillsborough man Dec. 1. Roger

Ray, 59, died after smoking material started a fire in his living room. Ray was using an oxygen tank when the fire started, according to Hillsborough Fire Marshal Jerry Wagner in a press release. The oxygen tank is believed to have caused the fire to spread faster.

Holiday lights in and around a Christmas tree caused a fire Dec. 19 that damaged a two-story duplex apartment in Chapel Hill. The fire displaced two families, including several children. Damage is estimated at \$300,000.

Canova said residents can take preventative steps by educating themselves about proper ways to dispose of cigarettes and the correct way to install a smoke detector.

Crabtree said the fire department offers free smoke alarm installation, as well as chimney inspections. The fire department also recently began holding seminars at various apartment complexes to help residents learn how to use fire extinguishers and test smoke alarms.

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