

Precinct Reporter

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Displaced Family Seeks Help, Answers

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Last week's Westside Nubian meeting was deep into its weekly brainstorming session about how best to help the community when the big question hit, "What's that smell?"

A cold front and wet weather had everyone's fireplace going strong, but the smell adrift wasn't wood.

It was more like burning materials. The group of men stepped outside to see smoke seething from the eaves and roof tops and they started banging on doors to get everyone out of the six units at Bradley Court.

"They didn't even know their house was on fire," said John Griffin, who lives across the way at the Dorjil apartments. "We were having our meeting there and we kept smelling something like paper, cardboard wires and plastic, but at first we didn't see any fire."

Griffin, with the Westside Nubians, said the attic was smoking at about 4:30 p.m. and quickly spread. They banged on units yelling 'fire,' but some Spanish-speaking neighbors were afraid to open doors.

One of the Nubians ran back to get Connie Arellanes, a long-time resident who knows all her neighbors by name.

"Connie got them out of there; she talked to them in Spanish. By the time we got everyone out, here comes the fire department. The police told

us to get out of the way. They could have stopped it at one apartment, but six apartments burnt up."

The fire department came with a dozen trucks, he said, but the damage was done. The fire raged.

One resident took videos showing the fire in full force by 5:35 with the trucks just pulling in.

Connie Arellanes, who has been displaced with her grandson by extensive water damage, commended Griffin and the Nubians for alerting everyone. She said that lives could have been lost if they hadn't acted when they did..

"If it wasn't for John, Nick and Tyrone, I don't know what would have happened," she said. "We have a neighbor that has all this on video, and he has it all timed. The rest of the apartments have been damaged. We've all been displaced."

She ran into her neighbor's apartment where fire had worked its way down the chimney. The woman was hysterical and calling 911, but they got the children out. Another elderly couple didn't want to leave because their medication was in the house. In another unit, there was an elderly person, and a cancer patient with several children.

As Arellanes helped others out of danger, during the commotion someone ran in to her unit and stole her purse off the table.

With no money and no place to go, she said she received little, and the apartment owner gave her two choices. The first was \$40 to buy blankets and move temporarily into a unit until February 1, but there was no gas in the unit. Or, she could double up with another displaced family.

"It was suggested to me that I could move in with one of the other tenants that just moved in, and I was like, what? I don't know those people," she said.

With six units completely uninhabitable and red tagged, the Red Cross issued food and vouchers to her and another family to move into motels for two nights. Arellanes said she didn't receive any information about where to go from there.

Robert Bahler, spokesperson for the local Red Cross, said that

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Westside Fires

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depending on the severity of a disaster, they normally give food, hotel vouchers, and a list of local resources. The office also follows up with victims in 24 to 48 hours after an incident.

But with the shelter full in Big Bear, he said by Monday they had not been able to follow up. They planned to contact Westside fire victims by Tuesday. After the Precinct Reporter's call by late Monday, Arellanos had received many contacts and numbers to other agencies with help and information on emergency housing.

She also connected with Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino, who is now helping her transition with resources and hotel vouchers for two weeks.

Bahler said the Red Cross

will also direct Arellanes and the others to Fair Housing for counseling on tenants' rights, and the landlord's responsibility in this situation.

"The landlord is supposed to prorate their rent for the month that they're not staying there, and give them back their money they would have used for rent," he said.

On Monday, Arellanes said she spoke with a fire investigator at the apartment and asked him to investigate the lag in response.

Serenade apartment owner Jose Overa said that he could not comment while the fire is under investigation.

Jameel Mohamed came home to find two of his neighbors' roofs blazing, and said neighbors complained they had already waited 20 minutes.

Mohammad, who has a wife and a son, was relocated by management to another unit in the complex along with two other families. He, like the others, didn't have renters insurance, and water damage is extensive, he said.

He lost just about everything, all their furniture, but he is more concerned about his neighbors.

"I'm not looking for help — not that I don't need it — but the others, they don't have a place to stay. Connie, she was the one helping out the most, and guess what? She don't have a place to stay."

In terms of who really got hit, the other three apartments are totally gone, he said.

"All of my furniture, everything got totally burned," he said. "We'll just bite the bullet and move on. What else can we do? What's lost is lost."