

'He saved my life,' tenant says of son

12-year-old alerted mom of fire in Vic West home Sunday evening

KATIE DeROSA and CINDY E. HARNETT
Times Colonist

Mel Thornton and her 12-year-old son had only just finished moving into the top-storey suite of a Vic West home on Sunday evening when the boy woke his mother up around 10 p.m. to say the house was on fire.

The fire at 515 Wilson St., at the corner of Wilson and Springfield Street, started in the basement and flames quickly spread, licking up three sides of the three-storey, multi-unit home.

"He saved my life," Thornton said of her son, Stephen. She was sleeping heavily and didn't hear other tenants knocking on her door, but Stephen did.

Gord Hinds, who lives in the main part of the home with his 10-year-old daughter, Jadelyn, said he heard a commotion down stairs, opened up the door to the basement and saw flames shooting out.

He got his daughter out of the house and he and the basement-suite tenant grabbed a garden hose to try to put out the blaze.

The flames were too much, so Hinds got out and called 911. Everyone was out of the house when Victoria firefighters arrived.

Firefighters attempted to attack the blaze from inside, but had to quickly retreat when it was discovered the fire was coming from the basement area, "compromising the entrance floor," said battalion chief Bob Jones.

The blaze spread quickly mostly due to the "balloon construction" of the wood-framed home, fire inspector Brad Siefert said. There were few, if

any, fire-stopping materials, such as drywall or fire-rated doors.

Fire crews climbed ladders on the side of the home and doused the flames with hand-held hoses through windows.

The children were taken to hospital by ambulance for possible smoke inhalation and were later released.

"She's a trooper but she's shaken up for sure," Hinds said of Jadelyn.

Fire inspectors were at the house Monday, boarding up shattered windows and sifting through the wreckage to determine the cause.

Siefert said the blaze was likely an accident resulting from misuse of an electrical cord, power bar or smoking materials.

The damage is estimated at \$600,000. Tenants have been put up in a hotel for the next three days. Thornton said most of her belongings were still in boxes, but much of it is likely smoke-damaged.

The landlord, Tasma Hinch, inspected the damage on Monday, walking past the charred walls and stepping over debris in a state of near-disbelief.

Hinch, who has owned the home for the last 40 years, said she expects it will take a year and a half to repair the structure, which dates back to 1912.

The upper portion of the home caught fire just over a year ago, on Jan. 29, 2014. The cause of that fire was an overheated extension cord used to power a space heater. Contrary to bylaws, the smoke alarm in the top-floor suite was not working. There was heavy smoke causing an estimated \$20,000 damage.



Owner Tasma Hinch stands outside the multi-unit Vic West home where a fire caused \$600,000 in damage and left several tenants displaced. Below, some of the damage.

The three-storey home comprises two addresses: The lower half of the house is 517 Wilson St., which includes two bedrooms on the main floor and a bedroom and makeshift addition in the basement. The top floor of the house is at 515 Wilson St., which includes two bedrooms.

The top part of the home had just been re-wired and received a new roof before the fire in the lower portion of the home, Siefert said. kderosa@timescolonist.com ceha:nett@timescolonist.com



11-hour standoff ends with charges

Times Colonist

A man in his 60s is facing weapons charges after an 11-hour standoff Sunday on Lochside Drive in Saanich.

Saanich police received a call around 12:20 p.m. relating to a domestic dispute and a man who was possibly armed with a gun. The department responded with several officers, members of the emergency response team, members of the negotiating team and an ambulance. It wasn't until 11:35 p.m. that the man was arrested by members of the Greater Victoria Emergency Response Team.

"We are thankful that this incident could be resolved without harm to anyone," said Saanich police spokesman Sgt. Steve Eassie said. "We thank the public for their understanding and co-operation."

When police arrived, there were several people in the house, including a woman and two young children. Police were able to get everyone out safely, but the man refused to come out.

People living in the 5000-block of Lochside Drive were advised not to leave their homes for several hours as police attempted to negotiate with the distressed man.

Eassie said police had information that weapons could be involved. The home was searched Monday, Eassie said. He did not say if firearms had been seized.

Police called neighbours and advised them not to leave their homes, and to warn any expected visitors not to come.

Officers were able to communicate with the man by phone and he eventually surrendered.

Police have not released the man's name or said if they have been to the home before.

Peer-support group offers help to hoarders

RICHARD WATTS
Times Colonist

The difference between the single-minded stamp collector and the diagnosed hoarder is not a matter of degree or money, it's health, says a clinical psychologist who works with people affected by hoarding. "Hobbies are not the problem," said Dr. Eric Ochs, the clinical lead on a Vancouver Island group called HEAT, for Hoarding Education and Action Team.

It will host a peer-support group on Wednesday at a Saanich fire hall. "People can upset their spouse over a hobby but it's not a mental health diagnosis."

Hoarders typically can't stop acquiring objects, often collected at random and can't throw anything away. It can be newspapers,

coupons, or just odds and ends. It can even be pets.

Rooms and furniture in the house become so crammed they can't be used for their original purpose. Bathrooms or sinks can be filled with stuff and basic cleanliness can become difficult.

A hoarder might not eat at home for months. The building superintendent may have shut off their electricity or gas on orders from the fire department, concerned about fire hazards.

"It's often a random mess collection," said Ochs. "It's impeding the functionality of the home." Wednesday's meeting is open to anyone who has an interest, or is just looking to de-clutter their lives. Ochs said nobody will be making any judgments.

HEAT was formed with the

assistance of Island Health, safety officials such as fire departments, emergency medical technicians and other community groups, such as First Nations.

Ochs said hoarding affects about one in 20 people. That amounts to about one house in every suburban block in Greater Victoria. Hoarding has recently been recognized as a diagnosable mental condition.

But it's more often treated as a topic of jokes than a recognized health concern. So those affected by the disorder often deal with shame and anxiety.

Attempts to do something about the safety hazard, such as luring someone away from the home, then sneaking in to clean up, can cause serious anguish, even trauma. And the collection of stuff often starts

all over again, but with greater diligence.

Ochs said for mental-health specialists or well-meaning friends or family, helping a hoarder can be a long, drawn-out process, as with most therapy.

In some cases, the best way to approach it is with harm-reduction in mind, at least in the beginning.

"Can we start with a strategy that will keep it from getting worse or maybe we can see it getting better," said Ochs. "Maybe we can stop someone from being evicted or having their children removed."

The peer-support group is set for 7 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Saanich Fire Department, 760 Vernon Ave.

For details, go to viha.ca/health_info/hoarding. rwatts@timescolonist.com

Hiker's call goes to U.S.

The rescue of an injured hiker ran into a delay Sunday when his call to the 911 call was answered by an American dispatcher.

The man fell on the Juan de Fuca Marine Trail near Providence Cove, about four kilometres south of Port Renfrew, on a rugged portion of the isolated wilderness trail along the Pacific coast.

Because of their proximity to the U.S., the cell-phone call was picked up on the other side of the border and rerouted to a Victoria emergency dispatcher. The Victoria Joint Rescue Co-ordination Centre was called at 9:47 a.m.

Emergency Health Services and about 20 volunteer members from Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue hiked the challenging part of the trail to reach the injured man near Youth Creek, west of the Parkinson Creek trailhead. He had suffered significant upper-body injuries.

"It quickly became apparent that his injuries were too significant to endure what would be a very long rescue extraction," said Vickie Weber, senior manager of the search-and-rescue team.

At 4 p.m., park rangers requested assistance, said spokesman Lt. Paul Pendergast of navy public affairs. The Joint Rescue Co-ordination Centre considered a rescue by water too risky because of the sea conditions and rocky shore. Instead, a Cormorant helicopter from Canadian Forces Base Comox was used to take the man to safety, Pendergast said.

The man was taken to Victoria General Hospital at 7 p.m., Pendergast said.

Search-and-rescue crews then had to hike back to the Parkinson Creek trailhead in the dark, Weber said.

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