



Community rallies round victims who escaped from blaze

By Janet Maitland

Just before midnight on Tuesday 6 November a fire started in the roof of Willow House on The Grange estate and spread so rapidly it took 100 firefighters more than two hours to put it out. All 60 residents managed to escape unhurt, thanks to neighbours hammering on their doors. Some lost everything except the pyjamas they escaped in.

"We're incredibly blessed that a heroic stranger ran up the stairs and came banging on our door as we were utterly oblivious to what was blazing on top of us," said a resident from a top floor flat. "The roof next to ours caved in just two minutes after we left the building. We're alive thanks to him."

Swift local response

East Finchley immediately swung into action. The Grange Big Local regeneration project led the way, working with residents, local groups, Barnet Homes and the council to support those made homeless, and launching a crowdfunding page with CommUNITY Barnet.

"We raised over £1,500 in the first 24 hours, which is a testament to our local community," said Helen Harte, from CommUNITY Barnet.

In the days after the fire, a group of residents sent us a statement praising the police and firefighters, and thanking Rev Helen Shannon and her team from church@5. "They were on site within five minutes, opening up the community centre to provide comfort, food, clothes and beds. We've also been so encouraged by the response from the community as a whole."

Relocation concerns

The residents claimed that, although Barnet Council is



The damage to Willow House Photo Mike Coles

now listening to them, they were "pressurised into making long-term decisions without legal advice" the day after the fire. "Some residents were told to accept completely unsuitable accommodation in places as far away as Peterborough and Romford. Many of us have lived on The Grange for years and we have all worked hard to build our lives here. We must be enabled to stay in the immediate area as we continue to depend heavily on local support networks. We want to contribute to the rebuilding of our community."

A council spokesperson said their priority was to temporarily house all displaced residents in the borough or as close to the borough as possible. "Just one household has been housed more than five miles away," he stated.

The future: can you help?

The plan is to carry out remedial works so Willow House can be lived in again. The Fire Brigade is investigating the cause of the fire.

If you want to donate money go to www.gofundme.com and search for Grange Estate Fire or contact Claire Meade on info@grangebiglocal.org if you want to give household items.



Upper floor flats completely destroyed. Photo by Mike Coles

John the cobbler hangs up his boots

By David Melsome

He has plied his trade from the same shop for 30 years and seen generations of customers come and go, but now John Omar has been forced to hang a 'Closed' sign on the door of his shoe and luggage repair workshop in Manor Park Road, N2.

John was taken badly ill while visiting his daughter in the Midlands and, because the recuperation process looks like being a long one, he has reluctantly decided to retire.

'Extended family'

He told *The Archer*: "I'd like to say a great thank you to everyone far and wide for welcoming me to the neighbourhood. I've met some lovely people over the years, some that are unfortunately not with us but always in my memories, and my customers past and present have all been like my extended family. I'm grateful for all your custom over the years."

John opened for business in East Finchley in the late 1980s



Retired: John Omar

and soon built up a reputation for careful craftsmanship and excellent value for money, along with commuter-friendly evening opening hours.

He remembers odd commissions like being asked to mend some clown shoes and has happy memories of being invited to local street parties and sharing sweets with adults and children in the hectic run-up to Christmas each year.

We on *The Archer* team will miss John too; he has been a faithful advertiser in the newspaper for 18 years. On behalf of everyone who has ever used his services, we wish him a speedy recovery and a long and happy retirement.

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