

AFTER THE FIRE, RECOVERY

Friends, relatives, others help family recover from disaster

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, August 17, 2008

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WESTON, Ohio — Molly Steele and Jeremy Spanfellner are living borrowed lives.

The ones they were supposed to be living are gone, vanished, kaput. Only charred, melted bits remain to remind them how things were supposed to be before a fire ripped through their apartment here just over a month ago, killing two and displacing 28 others.

Now, the engaged couple sleeps in a motor home parked in her parents' driveway. Their two kids walk around in donated clothes and play with toys bought by others.

"It's just sad," said Mr. Spanfellner, 31. "We worked two years to get some nice things."

Most of those things met their end in the wee hours of the morning on July 13 amid 80-foot flames and heat powerful enough to melt the siding off of a home 100 feet away. The family lived on the ground floor of the apartment house in this Wood County village and was awakened by an upstairs neighbor frantically pounding on their door.

They and their young sons, Tyler Spanfellner, 7, and Logan Spanfellner, 4, escaped with little more than the clothes they wore to bed. Only their oldest child remembered to grab some shoes and a beloved stuffed animal. Watching the scene from across the road, which glowed orange with reflections of fire, was almost too much.

"I just stared at it for one minute," said Ms. Steele, 26. Then, "I broke down and started crying."

A blur of faces and exhaustion followed.

Molly Steele, right, and her fiancé, Jeremy Spanfellner, in the motor home they are living in now. With them are sons Tyler, far left, and Logan Spanfellner.

AUDIO SLIDESHOW

[Molly Steele talks about the Weston fire](#)

The American Red Cross provided food, water, and shoes. Friends, neighbors, and family gathered to provide comfort and talk to the kids. And a fireman returned with the family's snow-white cat, Blizzard, which had run upstairs into the flames.

"He was wet, black, and mad," Mr. Spanfellner said. "He's got no lives left."

Two days later, they were allowed back into the house to save what they could.

Mostly what they found were melted appliances and clothes mixed with wet drywall and smoke. They salvaged a few things — bikes, family photos, even a can of Red Bull energy drink that a sleep-deprived

Mr. Spanfellner drank on the spot — but it didn't add up to much.

"We spent two days there and didn't even fill up a 10-by-10 storage shed," he said.

That's where the generosity of others helped. Bags of clothes materialized out of nowhere. So did toys, homemade blankets, microwaves, silverware, and offers of places to stay. A co-worker of Ms. Steele from Wal-



Jeremy Spanfellner, left, and sons Logan, 4, and Tyler, 7, return to the burned apartment house. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

Mart gave the kids a PlayStation 2 and the Red Cross provided \$1,200 to spend on clothes, bedding, and food.

“I did expect help. I just didn’t expect help of this scope,” Ms. Steele said.

She and her family, who donated items they couldn’t use to others, have relocated to the home of her parents, Jim and Mona Steele, less than a mile away. There they can live in comfortable surroundings while they look for a new place.

Knowing that state fire investigators have said that the fire was likely caused by careless smoking upstairs, the pair intend to buy property this time around — with financial help from Mr. Spanfellner’s family — instead of renting.

“We both decided we don’t want to put that much trust in other people again,” Ms. Steele said.

There’s been other evidence of the fire’s psychological toll. For the first couple of nights after the blaze, Ms. Steele woke up at 3:12 a.m., the time she said she woke up in their burning apartment house.

The boys haven’t cried over the loss of so many of their playthings or even their pet gerbils, but it has skewed their sense of normalcy, so much so that for a while Logan would tell people matter-of-factly, “When this place burns down, we’re not going to have any toys again.”

The couple don’t believe in bad luck, but no one would blame them if they did.

Mr. Spanfellner said the fire occurred two months after he was laid off by Wal-Mart and only a week after they had decided to buy renter’s insurance — but before they actually did.

Still, you wouldn’t guess any of this if you happened to drop in for a visit. You’d just see Logan hopping onto his mother’s lap to give her a hug or climbing around the RV like a smiling, gap-toothed monkey.

Or maybe you’d find Tyler begging his father to toss him into the above-ground pool just one more time.

You’d see what looks to be a normal, happy family — just without their stuff.

“For me, it really wasn’t the stuff [that mattered],” Ms. Steele said. “I won’t miss the couch but I’m going to miss sitting there on the couch watching movies with the kids.”

That they can still do, even if the couch is a borrowed one.

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