

Fundraiser to help fire victims set for Monday

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Southampton - It's often the little things that seem big after a fire.

"We need everyday things," said Tertia Downer, 39. She was recently frustrated when she realized she did not have a strainer or a big spoon to make spaghetti. "You go to use something and it's like 'oh I don't have that anymore.'"

Downer and her family also are in need of sheets, towels and kitchen supplies after nearly all of their belongings were destroyed in a house fire Dec. 7. There will be a benefit for the family of four at Paisano's Restaurant and Pizzeria at 7 p.m. Monday.

Friends have organized the effort to help the Downers - Tertia, David, 46, Brittany, 15 and Kelsey, 12 - of 13 Lynn Drive in the wake of last month's fire, which caused an estimated \$80,000 in building, content and water damage, according to the Fire Department.

InStar Services Group, a restoration service company, boarded the house up and is set to remove debris and conduct tests before tearing the house down and rebuilding it - a process that will likely take six to eight months to complete, according to the company. Meanwhile, the family lives on their property in a trailer provided to them by InStar.

Peter Sierros, owner of Paisano's, said the restaurant is donating Italian pasta dishes for Monday's event, which is expected to draw about 100 people. There will be a DJ and raffle as well. Tickets cost \$20 per person. To buy one in advance, call 537-4072 or 459-1907.

Tertia Downer started working at Paisano's shortly after the restaurant opened nearly nine years ago, and her daughter Brittany also works there bussing tables.

"They've been with us a long time," Sierros said. "They're local. We help each other."

Another benefit for the family, held Dec. 19 at Opa Opa Steakhouse, raised \$1,700.

"I'm so lucky that I live in this community," Downer said. "I never would have thought in a million years that I could have so many people that care."

The trailer the family is living in is a motor home with a bathroom, kitchen, living room and two bedrooms. There is no counter space and few cabinets in the kitchen, so Downer used a Home Depot gift card to buy shelves.

"I'm trying to make the most of the space I have in here," Downer said. "We're adapting."

Downer received the Home Depot gift card thanks to Jamie Bloom, Westfield Wave swim team coach for three years, who asked the 80 swimmers she coaches to donate gift cards to the family.

Kelsey Downer, who is in her first year on the swim team, will swim for free as her \$710 yearly fee was waived, thanks to Partners With Youth funding and Harry Rock, Westfield YMCA executive director.

Meanwhile, the family continues to make adjustments.

Brittany and Kelsey now share a bedroom where they sleep in bunk beds.

"They're right on top of each other but it doesn't break them; it's going to make them," said Cathy Reynolds, a family friend. "They're getting their family time now."

Each family member has one towel and one set of sheets. Their socks, underwear, and hair brushes were also destroyed in the fire, Downer said.

"Everything is just so covered in smoke and chemicals," she said. "It's crazy."

The family has other worries as well. Neighbors called the police when someone attempted to break into the Downer's destroyed home while they were living in their trailer; communication has been difficult as their phone line, which is wired from the house to the trailer, fails in inclement weather; and after an abdominal surgery Nov. 14, Downer's legs and feet continue to ache.

"I can't win," Downer said. "My life has been so crazy."

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