

## Surviving a fire: Southampton family heartened by community support

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer



JERREY ROBERTS

*David and Tertia Downer, shown here with daughters Brittany, 15, and Kelsey, 12, have been staying at Clarion Hotel in Northampton.*

[ Originally published on: Thursday, December 27, 2007 ]

SOUTHAMPTON - They were watching a television program about the anniversary of Pearl Harbor when they smelled something burning.

"It smelled like melting candles," said Tertia Downer, 39, of 13 Lynn Drive.

Downer, who had a fibroid tumor removed the month before, had spent that Friday at the mall with her mother, Christmas shopping for her three daughters and 17-month-old grandson. She picked up a fleece, the movie "50 First Dates," and a Dora the Explorer bounce house for her grandson to climb in. Then she came home to decorate.

It was the first time since her surgery that she was so busy, so she decided to take a break on the couch with her husband, David Downer.

"I had a great day up until my house burned down," she said last week.

That night, Mr. Downer first thought the smell was coming from their woodstove downstairs. He went in one direction, his wife in the other. It was coming from their bedroom.

Mrs. Downer went to flick the light on in her bedroom, but when she opened the door there was a thick black smoke.

"Oh God. You open that door and oh my God," she said. "That smoke - I can just see it, still. And that smell, I can't even describe it."

David came up to check it out.

"It was crazy how fast it happened," Mrs. Downer recalled. "From the time he ran up the stairs it was so much more intense when he opened the door. It's so scary. I still don't believe it."

Meanwhile, her youngest daughter, Kelsey, 12, was on the phone with her Hampshire Regional classmate and Westfield Wave swim teammate Missy Reynolds when she started choking on the air.

"I had to rip the phone out of her hand and call 911," Mrs. Downer.

The scene

It was between 7 and 8 p.m. on Dec. 7 when David, Kelsey and Tertia Downer stood outside and watched their house go up in flames, as Southampton firefighters cut up burning bureaus and mattresses with an ax and threw them out the back window. Kelsey Downer wasn't wearing shoes or a coat. They later found out the fire was likely electrical, and started with a flickering light in their walk-in closet, which was filled with presents and clothes.

Brittany Downer, 15, was busing tables at Paisano's restaurant when she got a call from sister, Megan Kapinos, 21.

"She said the house was on fire but I thought it was just a little fire, so I stayed working until I got out," Brittany Downer said. She was set to get out soon, at 8:30 p.m.

Kapinos picked her little sister up from work. It was a short ride down the street. When they arrived, two Southampton police cruisers, three ambulances and four fire trucks - three from Southampton, one from Easthampton - were at the house.

"She (Kapinos) told me not to cry that the house was on fire but I couldn't help but cry because it's our house," Brittany Downer said.

After the blaze was put out, at around 1 a.m., firefighters asked the family if they wanted to go in their home. They cautioned them to be quick, as they didn't have face masks to protect from the smoke.

Brittany Downer said there was a black dripping substance on the top of her walls, her bulletin board and a hand-drawn picture of a tiger with cubs she had bought at a tag sale. She grabbed her notebooks for Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, where she is enrolled in the cosmetology program.

Her mother grabbed a few wedding and photos. She noticed a Coach purse she had bought for Brittany was removed from her bedroom and placed on a coffee table in the living room.

"Someone tried to save it," she said. "I think it was probably a girl firefighter. We have to joke about it otherwise I'll cry."

After the fire

"My face was swollen from crying so much," Tertia Downer said.

That night the Red Cross assisted Mr. and Mrs. Downer to a room at the Clarion hotel in Northampton. Brittany stayed with Megan, who lives in Easthampton, and Kelsey stayed at her friend Missy's.

Tertia Downer said she and her husband couldn't sleep, and she wanted a light on, fearing she might miss seeing more black smoke. She noted that if they were asleep when the fire broke out, they likely would have died.

The family's pets - a dog, Lucky, and three cats named Chloe, Piper and Kaleigha - survived. Chloe was found in the house two days after the fire, shaking under blankets in Brittany's room. The cat's pupils were dilated so much her eyes looked black, but a few days later they were noticeably blue again, Tertia Downer said.

Besides getting help from the Red Cross, the Fire Department and InStar Services Group, a restoration service company, the Downers have been helped by the community. The family has been staying at the Clarion, where they've received donated clothes, a refrigerator, microwave and more.

"It's getting tight," said Tertia Downer. She works at Crackerbarrel in Holyoke, and was offered a ham cooked by one of the chefs for Christmas dinner. The gesture brought her to tears.

Less than a week after the fire, Tertia Downer went to the doctor's office with her mother. While in her appointment, a couple went out and bought her four \$25 gift certificates to Stop & Shop. The woman handed her the certificates, saying, "Merry Christmas and we hope that 2008 will be a better year." This stirred the receptionist at the doctor's office to start a collection for the Downers.

The family is now living in a trailer on their property, and hope to rebuild their house.

A fundraiser for the family will be held at Paisano's in Southampton Jan. 7, at 6 p.m. The evening of entertainment will include a magician, DJ, and musical acts. Tickets are \$20, and are available at the door or by calling 527-8817. Donations can be dropped off at the home of Cathy Reynolds, 24 Strong Road in Southampton.

An event Dec. 19 at Opa-Opa's steakhouse in Southampton, raised \$1,600. Big Y supermarket has also donated a total of \$1,000.

"It's amazing how many people we don't even know are offering to help," Tertia Downer said. "It's given me a different outlook on life."

*Catherine Baum can be reached at [cbaum@gazettenet.com](mailto:cbaum@gazettenet.com).*