

Woodstock blast victims try to rebuild their lives

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A three story apartment building was gutted by an explosion and fire in Woodstock, Ont. on March 27, 2011.

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WOODSTOCK—Lost in the ruins of an apartment building explosion here is one of Laurel Brown's most cherished possessions, a blanket covered with pictures of her grandkids.

All of the 74-year-old woman's belongings were destroyed in the blast and fire that gutted the building early Sunday morning. Brown and her son were rescued by firefighters from her third-floor balcony.

But for the soft-spoken resident, possessions are insignificant.

"Those things can be replaced," added her daughter, Kathy. "You can't be replaced."

On Monday, Brown's thoughts and prayers were with her friend, one of two people still missing. Investigators continued to shore up the building and search through the rubble, but prospects looked grim.

"She is such a dear person," Brown said of her friend, her blue eyes shifting to her hands. "She'd always walk to the park. We'd share a coming and going."

While police have not confirmed fatalities, hope was fading as the hours passed. "We have prepared ourselves for what could be a tragic day," Woodstock Police Chief Rodney Freeman said earlier in the day.

Bill Watmough, 79, also hasn't been seen since the explosion.

"We are not doing well," said his daughter, who did not want to give her name. "This is such a horrible, horrible time."

Watmough's wife, Pat, who was rescued by firefighters from their apartment, is resting at her son Donald's home, physically and emotionally overwhelmed.

The cause of the explosion on Victoria St. S. isn't known yet. Larry Cocco, with the Ontario Fire Marshal, said investigators are in the initial stages and will be examining the building's natural gas service.

Freeman said there was no evidence of criminal activity.

On Monday, heavy machinery began tearing down walls so the structure would be safe to enter. When Brown returned for her car, an excavator was destroying what was left of her apartment.

It was unclear how long the recovery and investigation will take. The debris must be examined meticulously, officials said.

Seven people, including a firefighter who broke his leg, were taken to hospital. Six were treated and released, and one remains with non-life-threatening injuries.

Some 100 residents have been displaced from the 45 apartments. No one will be able to move in for quite some time, Freeman said.

As many as 35 residents have been put up at a local hotel. Others, like Brown, are staying with friends and family.

Michael Howe, president of Norquay Developments Ltd., which owns the building, is helping coordinate accommodations. “Our competitors have stepped up and offered up vacant units in their buildings,” he said.

Howe said they will start reconstructing the building as soon as the investigation is complete.

Resident Stacey Taverner, 49, was visibly shaken on Monday. “I didn’t sleep very much.”

“I’m hoping I can salvage something,” he said, adding he doesn’t have tenant insurance.

A Windsor law firm says it is organizing a class-action lawsuit on behalf of the residents.

Sharon Strosberg of Sutts, Strosberg LLP will be working with Toronto-based law firm Falconer Charney LLP. The firms have handled similar cases, such as the Sunrise Propane explosion in August 2008.

Brown hasn’t thought much about what comes next. She is beginning to rebuild, getting a new birth certificate, tax forms and prescription for her glasses. The avid churchgoer says she’s thankful for all the kindness she’s received in the past two days. Even so, it was her 4-year-old granddaughter, Karlee, who told her it was okay to cry.

“She said, ‘Grandma, I’m so sorry for the loss of your house and the blanket.’

“I think it’s hitting home today.”

