

## Why NYC Must Be Vigorous on Illegal Apartments

Queens Civic Congress Vice President Paul Kerzner shared this commentary after reading the news article that follows his comments

RE: 73rd St, Brooklyn fire kills tots - illegal basement, again (Feb. 9, 2007)

There were 15 people living in this house on 73rd St in Bklyn that had a fatal fire earlier this week, two toddlers died in the fire. A space heater was to blame. How did 15 people fit into this one or two family house?

Note the attached article: "The Dept of Buildings yesterday issued the owner of this building a violation for allowing the cellar to be used as an apartment," said this article.

We have repeatedly testified at Council hearings, and have met with the Buildings Commissioner asking her and/or the Council, for the following four reforms: re-instatement of cyclical enforcement, re-inspection of violation addresses until there is compliance (the NYPD Compstat formula), implement access legislation, and unpaid ECB fines to be converted to tax liens to insure compliance.

If these four reform measures were in place prior to this 73 Street fire, it is doubtful the results would have been so tragic. As I have ended each of my discussions when seeking these necessary Building Dept reforms, I remind all those who will listen, " I guess a few more children and adults have to die, before the city's elected officials decide to implement these reforms."

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### FIRE KILLS TOTS

By HEIDI SINGER, PATRICK GALLAHUE and CYNTHIA R. FAGEN

February 9, 2007 -- A faulty space heater set off a blaze that killed two young girls yesterday in their Brooklyn house as their mother stood outdoors and screamed helplessly for them. Aya Khawatini, 4, and her sister Fatin Lazhir, 2, were trapped in their bedroom in the 5:30 a.m. inferno. Firefighters had to hold back their hysterical mom, Amal Lazhir, from trying to run into the three-story brick building at 514 73rd St. in Bay Ridge.

Lazhir's two other daughters, Fatima, 5 and Wafa, 3, and two older relatives escaped the raging fire on the second floor. Eleven residents fled from the other floors.

The mom had been at her marketing job early that morning, and police told her of the tragedy unfolding at home soon after she arrived at work. Cops picked her up and drove her back to a scene of horror.

Lazhir, shouting her children's names, tried to run into the burning house where she had left them snuggled in their beds. Firefighters and friends held her back as she collapsed in their arms.

"The mother was screaming on the ground. She was looking at photos of her kids on a cellphone," said a shaken neighbor Moqbel Ali, 39.

"She said, 'Are you alive? Are you dead? Please tell me.' It was like she was talking to them."

Lazhir's sister, Jamila Hame, was caring for the children and was there with her son, Rami, 12. Rami noticed the fire and woke up his mom.

"Rami tried to save everybody. He said when he tried to pick up the girls they were a ball of fire," said Rami's cousin, Sammy Lazhir, 16.

"He shakes when he talks about it because he was trying to save them."

Five residents of the building were treated for burns and smoke inhalation at two local hospitals.

Also injured were 17 firefighters, who fought the three-alarm blaze in sub-freezing weather for two hours. A total of 140 firefighters were at the scene.

Fire officials said the cause of the blaze was a faulty space heater that had been placed in the hallway between Aya's and Fatin's two bedrooms.

"This heater was very close to bedding," said Robert Byrnes, assistant chief fire marshal, adding that "the cord may have been compromised."

The city Buildings Department yesterday issued owner Fatima Habbas a violation for allowing the cellar to be used as an apartment, sources said.

Next-door neighbor Christine LeGrand, 22, recalled: "Big orange flames were just flapping across my kitchen window. I grabbed my son. I just ran for my life."

She said that outside, a barefoot Hame was screaming, "The babies! The babies!"

"There was nothing I could do," LeGrand said.

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