

A paper burns

Fire at the Gay Community News

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It is possible, of course, that the fire was purely accidental. But all the signs, as well as the obvious suspicions, point toward arson. If so, whoever set the fire that gutted the downtown offices of *Gay Community News* early last Wednesday morning destroyed a whole lot more than the equipment and files of a struggling but unique little newspaper serving a very special audience.

All the physical evidence, as well as the analysis of a noted arson expert, point to this scenario. Someone sneaked down an alley off Broomfield Street, climbed up the fire escape at the rear of the century-and-a-half-old granite structure, kicked in a steel window grating on the second floor, and torched the place. The result was the gutting of a couple of historic institutions (the newspaper and the building itself) and the destruction of the creations of several artists whose studios were on the building's third and fourth floors. The fire very nearly claimed those artists' lives.

The fire department was notified at 5:24 a.m. by artist Donald Shambroom, who says he was working in his third-floor loft on a series of elaborate fantasy murals when he was alerted by the piercing whine of the smoke detector in the corridor. He looked out the window and saw flames blazing away in the second-story office of *Fag Rag*, a paper published intermittently by a gay-community collective. "It was going pretty good," he said. "I immediately ran up and down the stairs and knocked on all the doors." Seven alarms were sounded, Shambroom and two other artists escaped the building by means of a fire ladder, and four or five others fled the building via the same fire escape that the arsonist would have used. Their work, however, was destroyed. "Virtually everything I own was in there," Shambroom said.

The fire was extinguished an hour and a half later, but by the time most of what had been the office of the *Gay Community News* (GCN) for the past eight years was also destroyed, as was Glad Day bookstore and its stock of gay literature. "All our financial records were in the office and are wrecked," said Amy Hoffman, who had just stepped down after three years as GCN's managing editor, and who was the first staff member to arrive at the scene, at 6 a.m., while the four-and-a-half story building at 20-24 Broomfield Street was still ablaze. "We also lost all our copies of back issues. We still have them on microfilm, except for the first year, but we won't be able to send out any more back issues to readers." The paper was insured, "but most of the stuff here, other than two IBM Selectrics, is not valuable in a monetary sense," Hoffman said.

"The worst thing is just to lose the space," she said, still on the scene five hours later as other staff members were doing their best to retrieve files, books, and half-melted Rolodexes from the charred and blackened remains of their office. "It's horrible. I think I'm in a state of shock right now. Part of it is just my emotional attachment to this space. For the past three years, most of my waking hours have been spent here." She paused. "So much history has gone through this space." Indeed, the *Gay Community News* got its start precisely 10 years ago at the Charles Street Meeting House, and its downtown office was destroyed the very week that its anniversary issue was going to press. "Happy birthday," Hoffman remarked.

Meanwhile, firefighters were trudging through the place and shouting at the GCN staffers to stay out. The firemen were worried that the sagging ceiling might collapse; the GCN people were more concerned that their damaged files might fall into the wrong hands. There was a collective sigh of relief down on Broomfield Street when a soaked but legible copy of the paper's subscription list was recovered. "Thank God the police didn't find that," said one.

"The office is a complete loss," said managing editor Cindy Paton, on the job for her first full week. "But we'll continue publishing. The 10th-anniversary issue will be thinner than we'd planned, but we'll get it out. Except for the Blizzard of '78, we've never missed an issue." Paton was "shell-shocked," she said, but Nancy Weschler, a member of the GCN board of directors, was displaying a stronger emotion. "Under the shock and depression," she said, "there's just an incredible amount of anger that some person or some group thought that they had the right to burn out our building. It's one thing to have a political disagreement, and a whole other thing to destroy those you disagree with, to say they don't have a right to exist. There has to be a public outcry about this. Otherwise we're all in trouble. Everybody. Your newspaper, too." GCN reporter Larry Goldsmith, meanwhile, was skeptical that the Boston Fire Department arson squad would investigate the fire fully enough. The paper's offices, after all, have been shot at and vandalized in the past, he noted, and when troublemakers have barged into the place, the police have taken an hour or longer to show up. "The reaction of the cops has been, 'You have to expect this sort of thing,'" he said.

While the burned-out tenants of the building's second floor were calling for a full and complete investigation of this fire, which they immediately saw as an obvious, open-and-shut case of homophobic arson, the fire department would not even concede, for the record, that it was "suspicious." Kenneth Bruynell, the department's public-information officer, said the fire caused an estimated \$500,000 in damage, but stressed that the cause is listed as "undetermined." And though the arson squad is, indeed, investigating, he said, this fact alone should in no way be

construed as a message that the fire was likely to have been set. "There were a lot of allegations made by some of those GCN people, but they couldn't back them up," Bruynell said. Yes, the fire did start on the second floor, he said, but "there is a lot of electrical equipment in a newspaper office, and somebody might have forgotten to turn off a machine or something. It's also an old building with electrical wiring throughout. Some of it could have been overloaded. We have to look at all these things." A fire is only listed as "suspicious," he said, "if there is some concrete reason to believe that someone has set it."

In this case, there seem to be several. Other than those IBM Selectrics, first of all, there was no fancy electrical equipment in the GCN office; nor were there obvious hazards of any sort. "I know about the reputation of newspaper offices," said Cindy Patton, "but this office was extremely neat." Second, the office had been padlocked at 11 o'clock Tuesday night, after several GCN employees finished folding and collating inserts for the 10th-anniversary issue. That front door was still securely locked when the firefighters arrived Wednesday morning. So no one had entered the building from the front. But that steel window grating on the second floor had been kicked in before the fire department arrived. And third, arson investigators on the scene Wednesday morning made note of the fact that molten metal and glass near that rear window indicated that the fire reached temperatures as high as 1200 degrees — much higher than temperatures that would have resulted from an accidental fire.

"Preliminary testing at the spot where the fire started indicates a strong probability that an accelerant was present," said David Scondras, long-time community activist and the chief arson investigator for Urban Educational Systems. His conclusion? "Someone went down the alley, up the fire escape, kicked in the grating, and put in an accelerant." Translation: the fire was set. Scondras and UES launched an instant investigation of the fire and had put together all these pieces of the puzzle by the end of the day. At that point, few of the artists who were in the building when the blaze broke out, and who had been interviewed by Scondras, had as yet heard from any other arson investigators (both the fire department's arson squad and agents from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms had been on the scene). Scondras, however, seemed to think that isolating the possible motives was something that had to be done quickly. "There are many gay-community institutions that are equally vulnerable," he said. "If this was the opening shot in an unfolding drama of hate, we've got to know that immediately."

Anti-gay hatred is a likely motive for the fire, he said, but there are others. "It could have been a random kook fire," said Scondras, "but that's extremely unlikely. Those usually involve abandoned buildings out in the neighborhoods. This was an inconvenient location for that sort of thing."

On the other hand, 20-24 Bromfield Street, is a rundown building — a firetrap, the tenants say — in the midst of the downtown shopping district and lots of prime redevelopment space (indeed, the trust that owns the building is known as the Downtown Development Company). It is managed by the Druker Company, which has not been maintaining the building at all, tenants complain. (Phone calls to the management company, in an effort to elicit its response, went unreturned.) Broken windows at the rear of GCN's second floor office — where the fire started — were not repaired despite continual complaints, Amy Hoffman said. And the leaky roof just kept getting worse. Despite all this, all the third- and fourth-floor tenants received notices a week before the fire that their loft rents, which averaged \$150 a month, were being hiked to \$200. The talk on Bromfield Street in the fire's wake last week was that the Druker Company's redevelopment plans for the area were not going terribly well. Two street-level tenants at 36 Bromfield, also owned by Downtown Development and managed by Druker, moved out after their rents were tripled; these storefronts remain vacant. And burned-out tenants of 20-24 Bromfield were saying that the building was not a likely candidate for redevelopment because of its age, size, and odd construction. None of this, of course, is evidence of anything, precisely, but as Scondras says, "A third possibility is a financial motive." He intends to investigate all three possibilities.

"For years I've been afraid of something like this happening," said Donald Shambroom, the artist who reported the fire, and who has had a studio in the building for eight years. "Because of all of the development in the area I thought I'd have two years left in the building at the most." And no, he wasn't insured. "It was not possible for an artist to get fire insurance in that building," he said. So the fire destroyed about three years worth of Shambroom's work, including the murals he'd been designing for a show at the Institute of Contemporary Art. Luckily, however, he had recently had the works photographed, so they can be reproduced. "I'm going to do it," he said. "I'm not going to let this set back my career, but it's going to be a challenge."

And for Brenda Lowen-Siegel, a painter whose third-floor studio was directly above the spot where the fire began, it's going to be a bit more than that. "I lost all the paintings of my life, from graduate school until now," she said. "I've lost my whole past." Similarly, the *Gay Community News* — which had grown into a serious journal of gay news, culture, and opinion, with a national reputation — has lost a big piece of its past, and has always just barely scraped by financially anyway. It now must rely on the generosity of the community at large if it is to survive.

Finally, if the burned-out building has to be demolished, the city of Boston will have lost a crucial piece of its past as well. This gray, granite structure was built in the 1840s, and may be the only remaining downtown commercial structure of its type. "I think it's a very important building historically," said Brian Powell, a student of Boston's architecture who researched this building for the Boston Landmarks Commission. "It's not important in the sense that the Old State House and the Trinity Church are, but it is an exemplar of the commercial buildings of Boston during a real golden age. There was a time when this was a granite city, and this building is the only real survivor."

This piece of urban history, ironically, is also one of the very few survivors of the Great Boston Fire of 1872, which started in a warehouse a mere two blocks away. Now, who will be the survivors of the Bromfield Street fire of '82? Well, the artists will continue to create, and though they've lost a part of their community, what remains of it is responding to their plight. "I love Boston and I intend to stay," said Donald Shambroom. "I really appreciate the support I've gotten from the art community." "I was carrying out my paintings, and they were all ruined," said Brenda Lowen-Siegel. "I sat down on the curb and a woman — a bag lady really — came up and asked me if I needed some money for lunch. It was so empathetic, and so kind." The *Gay Community News* has been getting offers of help and temporary office space as well.

Unfortunately, though, the comments of passerby last Wednesday were not uniformly supportive.

As GCN staffers were lugging out their file cabinets, and trying to piece together charred back copies of the paper, one elderly fellow finally figured out just what sort of a publication this was. Pointing at the pile of papers, he suddenly announced, "It's a real shame — except for *this*." And the GCN people stared back at him in disbelief.

