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Pip Moyer's house burns; first black deputy's home also damaged

By JEFF HORSEMAN, Staff Writer

As mayor in the 1960s, Pip Moyer saved his city from flames. Last night, it was Annapolis' turn.

A blaze that started in his chimney uprooted the legendary 71-year-old Annapolitan from the modest Eastport home his father built in 1936. Twenty-nine firefighters contained the fire in less than a half-hour and no one was injured.

Outside his home at 419 5th St., in the chilly pre-dusk air, the ex-husband of current Mayor Ellen O. Moyer was wrapped in blankets in his wheelchair, encircled by friends and relatives.

"I was lucky I wasn't asleep when it happened. It was a blessing," said Mr. Moyer, who has battled Parkinson's disease for 14 years.

Ms. Moyer stopped by the scene. She noted that earlier in the day, a small fire damaged the home of George Phelps, the county's first African-American deputy sheriff and a friend of Mr. Moyer's.

"We are blessed, on one hand, because everyone is safe, people and animals" she said. "On the other hand, it's tragic anytime. But it certainly is tragic when you're older and all the comforts that you're used to and that you enjoy are suddenly just pulled away."

The 911 call came in at 5:10 p.m. Mr. Moyer had a fire going in his fireplace when he heard a sound coming from the chimney.

"It sounded like a freight train had gone by," he said.

He called to his two caretakers, Alphonso Coates and James Taylor who were in another part of the house and came upon a smoke-



By Alison Harbaugh -- The Capital
Twenty-nine firefighters battled the blaze at former mayor Pip Moyer's Fifth Street home in Eastport.



filled living room. They raced him outside along with Mr. Moyer's dog, Basker, and his daughter Loni's dog, Flower.



A passer-by called 911. Firefighters from the city, county and Naval Academy responded as the fire spread from the chimney to the attic.



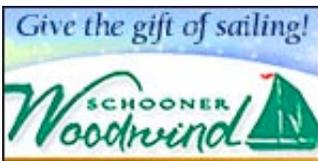
Capt. Joseph Martin, city Fire Department spokesman, said the fire is under investigation. It caused about \$80,000 in damage.

In yesterday's other blaze, firefighters were called to Mr. Phelps' home at 1947 Drew St. at 3:30 p.m. City, county and Naval Academy firefighters had that one under control by 3:49.



"I went back and saw smoke and I called the fire department," said Mr. Phelps, 79. "I called the fire department before it even hit the house."

Mr. Phelps and his wife, Marion, live in the house. He is recovering from an eye operation and said Mrs. Phelps has been in poor health.



The fire started on a small wooden porch in the rear of the house. Lt. Ed Hadaway, a city Fire Department spokesman, said ashes from a fireplace were put in a cardboard box and left on a railing.

Mr. Phelps and his wife have been active in civic and community affairs in the city. Mr. Phelps won the Morris H. Blum Jr. Humanitarian Award in 1997 for his work as a community liaison with city police.

The Phelpses were able to stay in the home.

Moyer fire

Mr. Moyer's two-story, 1,482-square-foot home looked stable from the outside, although the eaves and parts of the roof were blackened by flames. A large stack of firewood ran the length of one outside wall.

The house is to the Moyers what the Hyannisport, Mass., compound is to the Kennedys.

Loni Moyer said the property originally belonged to her great-grandfather. He passed it on to her grandfather, who dug the home's foundation using mules and buckets. Loni and her four siblings spent a lot of time in the house, which had a Victory Garden during World War II.

"Grandma cooked apple pie and covered us in blankets," Loni Moyer said.

Mr. Moyer grew up when Eastport was a blue-collar neighborhood with no plumbing, oyster-shell roads and a large African-American

population.

He starred on the basketball court, where he developed a trademark hook shot. He was the only white player on a 10-member city basketball team.

As mayor from 1965 to 1973, Mr. Moyer fought for civil rights. His rapport with the African-American community was vital in 1968, when he and others convinced residents not to torch the city following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

He later became director of the Annapolis Housing Authority, which manages the city's public housing.

Parkinson's has limited his public appearances in recent years, but people continue to seek him out for advice. He's never been shy about speaking out for the city's disadvantaged, calling the layoffs of 10 housing authority employees last year "shameful and tawdry."

To this day, he remains a popular figure. Among those by his side last night was former county executive Joe Alton, who asked for a pin to fasten Mr. Moyer's blankets together.

Also on the scene was community activist Larry Griffin. He smelled the smoke from his job at Carrol's Creek Cafe and raced in his chef's clothes to the scene.

"He showed me what a man could be about," Mr. Griffin said. "That if I fell, I could pick myself up."

Alderman Josh Cohen, D-Ward 8, rushed over after hearing about the fire on the radio.

"It's really devastating," Mr. Cohen said. "He has tremendous compassion. And that's not just while he was in office. That's who he is."

Mr. Moyer will stay with his son, Guy, and daughter-in-law, Dawn. It's unclear when, or if, he'll return home. With both fires involving fireplaces, Lt. Hadaway reminded the public to dispose of ashes in covered metal containers away from combustibles.

He said chimneys should be inspected annually, and cracks in bricks, mortar and liners should be immediately repaired.

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