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Grateful for Gloucester...

A Christmas Story

by Annie Burton

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In June 2007, I moved back to Gloucester after being gone for 22 years. On December 13 that year, a friend and I went to Wolf Hill and picked out a real Christmas tree for my apartment on Middle Street. We had fun decorating the tree with all my old sentimental ornaments and some new ones. It was the first real tree I had in a long time.

The next evening the fire alarms were going off, and I called 911. I hadn't smelled smoke or seen a fire, but I figured they were going off for a reason. When I went downstairs to let the firefighters in, the first floor was filling with smoke. Later the entire building was on fire!



PHOTO CREDIT: JAY ALBERT

I watched the fire from the street with a growing crowd of people. I didn't know that I was about to lose everything. As the fire grew, many thoughts flooded my mind, like "I hope my cat is OK." I also remembered my son was due to return home from work soon. I walked through the crowd looking for him, and when I found him, he was dumbfounded and hysterical. I did my best to calm him.

Once I saw flames shooting from my apartment windows, I thought, “My cat is dead.” Later I saw a woman carrying a cat; I couldn’t believe it was my Elsie! I was so relieved and thankful. A neighbor watching our reunion graciously offered to lend me her cat carrier.

All of my family photos were burned in the fire. I had many pictures of me as a child and my son growing up. That was the worst of the material losses. Also, all the old Christmas ornaments I had just hung the night prior had great sentimental value. As I hung each one of them, I reflected on specific memories attached to each and every ornament. A few were antiques that had been my paternal grandmother’s when she was a child; she passed them down to me.

The evening was tragic. While I lost everything, as did everyone else that lived at the Lorraine Apartments, at least we walked out alive. One person was sadly lost. The Temple next door also burned down.



PHOTO: MARY MUCKENHOUP - GLOUCESTER DAILY TIMES

From left to right: Fire Marshal Steve Coan, former Governor Deval Patrick, and former Mayor John Bell assess the situation.

But out of the tragedy did come some amazing displays of generosity and kindness. For example, a local veterinarian treated my cat, Elsie, for smoke inhalation and didn’t charge me. I wish I could remember the vet’s name! The Gloucester Fund was also a huge help financially, as was the Red Cross, and Action, Inc. A big thank you to Valerie Cook from the Gloucester

Housing Authority who was a tremendous help getting me housing, and to the Rotary Club for donations of furniture. So many others donated money, furniture, and clothes to help the twenty or so people who had lost everything and were left homeless. With everyone's help, I found a new place to live a month later. The Gloucester community came through BIG TIME!

Although I was technically homeless at Christmas, I stayed with a friend. Eventually the future didn't look so bleak due to the kindness and generosity of Gloucester's people. I'm still in Gloucester, my hometown, and I have a love and appreciation for this city that continues to grow. Everyone here displayed the spirit of Christmas, and the heart of this city. Thank you all!

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