



Mark O'Neill of the Boston Emergency Service measured a window early yesterday morning of the third floor, where the fire is thought to have started. (Globe Staff Photo / Justine Hunt)

2 BU students killed in blaze

Third person hurt; 30 are displaced

By Brian R. Ballou and Maria Cramer, Globe Staff | February 25, 2007

Boston fire officials are investigating what caused a blaze to rip through an Audubon Circle apartment building yesterday, killing two Boston University students, injuring a third man, and displacing 30 people, many of them college students.

Fire officials did not identify the man or the woman who died in the three-alarm fire at 19 and 21 Aberdeen St. They said the third victim suffered from smoke inhalation and was taken to Massachusetts General Hospital, where he was in serious condition. Officials said they need to interview him before determining what caused the fire to break out at 5:15 a.m. at the three-story building.

Relatives identified the woman as Rhiannon McCuish, 21, of Mashpee. The man was identified by a friend as Stephen Adelipour, 21, a Boston University senior.

Those displaced yesterday described a chaotic morning that began when NStar employees trying to repair a power outage on Aberdeen Street saw flames shooting from the roof and the windows of the third floor of 21 Aberdeen St. They began screaming to alert residents inside.

"I was never so scared," said Lauren Fischer, 21, who was sleeping in her first-floor apartment in the building when she was awakened by the sounds of breaking glass and the smell of smoke.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life."

Holt Pagano, a sophomore at Emmanuel College who lives at 19 Aberdeen St., said he and his roommates had lit candles after the power failed before 9 p.m.

"I assume others did, too," said Pagano, 20.

In Mashpee, at the home where McCuish grew up, her family received a steady stream of calls and visits from her friends, former teachers, and coaches, and others offering condolences.

Michaela McCuish described her younger sister as "a happy, lovable girl who enjoyed playing soccer and basketball." Rhiannon, the second-oldest of three sisters, graduated from Mashpee High School in 2004 and enrolled at Boston University the same year as a psychology major. In addition to her studies, Rhiannon recently joined the Big Brothers Big Sisters program in Boston, mentoring a girl with the same name as her older sister.

"Her singing, that's what put a smile on my face," Michaela said of her sister. "She loved to sing Ashlee Simpson [songs] and would always dance this goofy style when she did. I'm very surprised and it's unbelievable that she's gone."

A woman who answered the phone at an address listed for Adelpour in Great Neck, N.Y., declined to comment, saying the family was in no condition to speak.

"He was one of those people who always made you smile," said Elisia Krafchin, a 21-year-old senior who said Adelpour, a senior in the BU School of Management, was a close friend. Kenneth Elmore, the dean of students at Boston University, confirmed that two BU students had died in the fire. "This is like a death in the family," he said. "We've lost two students and all their potential. Young people dying, it's just devastating."

He said that he had not yet spoken to the families, adding that the university would offer counseling services to students.

According to BU's website, university chaplains will be on hand this afternoon in Robinson Chapel for anyone who would like to talk about the tragedy or remember the victims.

A crew of seven NStar employees who had been at the complex for hours, trying to repair an underground cable line, were working in a manhole when they saw the fire, said Caroline Allen, a spokeswoman for NStar. They ran to the building and began banging on the doors.

Students living in the building said they could hear them screaming from outside, "There's a fire! There's a fire! Get out! Get out. Get out."

People scrambled out of the building screaming, most in pajamas, several of them barefoot, and some of the men shirtless. They gathered outside in the cold, and watched flames shoot out of the windows of unit 6 at 21 Aberdeen St., where Adelpour lived with two other men.

About 50 firefighters arrived at 19 and 21 Aberdeen St. and worked for an hour to extinguish the flames, said Stephen MacDonald, spokesman for the city's fire department. He estimated the damage at \$1,000,000.

"Through the process of elimination we're trying to figure out how it started," he said.

Allen, the NStar spokeswoman, said the company had received no information on whether the fire department is investigating the power outage as a possible cause of the fire. The crew was able to restore power to the building by 10 a.m. It was unclear what caused the outage.

"We replaced a section of cable that had failed," she said. She did not know what made it fail.

"We have a very large underground system, from time to time we do experience problems." She said NStar crew members were interviewed at the scene by the Boston Fire Department. "There was no current running into the building," she said.

"We're just very happy that [the employees] were there and able to help get people out," said John Connelly, an NStar spokesman. "Hopefully they helped save some lives."

The three victims were found in two bedrooms in the back of the apartment, MacDonald said.

Neighbors said a small party had taken place in the apartment the night before. The party was loud, but not rowdy. Neighbors said that even though there was no power, they could hear music playing at about 2 a.m.

Yesterday afternoon, Pierre L. Wolfe, the manager of the property, shook his head as he walked through the charred apartment, where nearly everything had been burned beyond recognition, except a bed and a dresser in a bedroom. The walls were blackened and the floors were covered in a thick layer of soot and ash.

"It's totally destroyed," Wolfe said, almost in a whisper.

Adelpour had been living in the three-bedroom apartment with two other Boston University students since September, said the owner of the unit, who asked not to be identified. The men had never caused problems at the apartment, which had a smoke detector, a carbon monoxide detector, and a fire escape, the owner said.

"They were all wonderful fellows, very responsible," the owner said. "It's a great tragedy." Most of the tenants in the two apartments at 19 and 21 Aberdeen St., which together hold 18 units, were from Boston University, but some attended Emmanuel College and other schools, said Colin Riley, spokesman for Boston University. The school had no oversight over the units.

The city's Inspectional Services Department had received no complaints other than individual reports of infestation by bed bugs inside the building and by rodents outside, said Lisa Timberlake, spokeswoman for the department.

Steve Barr, a trustee of the 7-21 Aberdeen Condo Association, said the association sets rules and regulations concerning safety at the building.

"We're going to have to make a ton of decisions now," he said. "There will be massive insurance claims."

Students displaced by the fire were taken to the Boston University Sargent Activities Center , where they waited for their parents or word from officials that it was safe to return to the buildings. Several hours after the fire, some parents rushed into the center, looking for their children. Fischer, a senior at Boston University majoring in advertising communications, began crying when she saw her mother, who drove from Pennsylvania yesterday.

Fischer's roommate, Charlotte Morris , 21, had been staying at a friend's house for the night when Fischer called her in the morning to tell her about the fire. Morris rushed home, and barged through a police line to get to the apartment, but had to wait outside as firefighters doused the flames.

"I've never been so cold in my life," she said. Morris said she was worried about the kind of damage the fire had done to her belongings, especially her laptop.

"The last five years of my life is on my computer," she said. "But at least I'm here. Unfortunately, other people can't say that."

Students living in 21 Aberdeen St. and neighboring apartments returned to their buildings late yesterday afternoon and gathered anything they could, including clothing, electronics, and CDs. Several students gathered at the building yesterday to look at the damage. Krafchin recalled her last conversation with Adelpour, whom she had known for more than three years. She said he had told her he would visit her Friday night, but he never showed up.

"I just wish he would have come over," she said.

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