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SAM ODROWSKI PHOTO

DEVASTATING APARTMENT FIRE: Jack Brakel (left) and his girlfriend Mikayla Evans (right) look at the remains of the 22 Mill St. fire. Brakel moved in just three weeks ago and lost all of his belongings to the blaze on Aug. 25. He plans to live with his parents until he can find another place to live.

Apartment fire on Mill St. leaves tenants homeless, closes down Old Mill Hub

Written By SAM ODROWSKI

Mikayla Evans, 19, woke up her boyfriend Jack Brakel, 21, around midnight last Wednesday, to the smell of smoke and confusion.

Once they got to safety outside, they watched as their apartment at 22 Mill St. and everything they own inside burst into flames.

"The whole roof was on fire; it was just engulfed in flames," said Brakel, who moved into the apartment in downtown Orangeville with Evans three weeks ago.

The 22 Mill St. unit was their first apartment, and without tenant insurance, everything they own is now gone.

The seven other tenants who lived there are in similar situations, with many also not having insurance, sparking several online fundraisers, generating roughly \$18,000 to date.

Brakel's sister, Lauren started a GoFundMe to help replace his belongings and cover first and last month's rent on a new place. It's raised \$3,620 as of press time.

The fire itself is one of the largest for downtown Orangeville over the past two decades in terms of recourses. It took almost eight hours to fully extinguish, with roughly 35 firefighters on the scene from Orangeville,

Caledon, Shelburne and Grand Valley.

The last fire of similar size in Orangeville's core was at the Mad Hatter in 2003.

Orangeville fire chief, Ron Morden said local crews arrived to the scene at approximately 12:30 a.m. on Thursday morning and conducted a primary search before being driven out by the flames.

He said firefighters poured water onto it continuously until it was extinguished.

The investigation into the fire's cause is too early to deem suspicious or non-suspicious at this time and a Dufferin OPP press release on Monday said a "comprehensive and exhaustive investigation" into the incident is taking place.

"The investigation is ongoing and there is no suspect information currently," read the release.

Anyone with information or video of the incident can contact the OPP at 1-888-310-1122.

Chief Morden stressed the importance of checking smoke alarms to make sure they're working to avoid a tragedy, as they need to be replaced every 10 years.

He also spoke to the significance of the fire for both the 22 Mill Street tenants and businesses impacted.

"This is a tragic day for the residents and

the retail owners of the businesses here," he said. "It is basically a total loss for these people, and they're going to be struggling for some time."

Marshal Bobechko, property manager of the Old Mill Hub (28 Mill St.) and 22 Mill St., said the tenants are either couch or car surfing, as the fire has left all of them without a home.

Impact to business and arts community

The Old Mill Hub is closed until further notice and inaccessible to the 18 businesses within it, who have been deeply impacted by the fire. The blaze has also been devastating to the local arts community.

Bobechko converted the Mill Street Mall into the Old Mill Hub last year, and it featured the work of many local artists. The countless paintings that lined the halls are all destroyed due to smoke damage.

When looking at the soonest the Old Mill Hub may reopen, Bobechko said the best-case scenario would be one year's time, due to the extent of the damage it incurred. There's also the potential for disturbed asbestos, making it more difficult to remediate, Bobechko added.

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Continued from FRONT

Apartment fire on Mill St. leaves tenants homeless, closes down Old Mill Hub

He told the Citizen, when the hub reopens, it will likely have a smaller footprint.

"We have insurance but it's limited. It's not going to give us the amount that we need to get it back to what it was," Bobechko explained. "So even if we rebuild, it will be a much smaller building, and then the rest of it might just be a parking lot."

Bobechko received a phone call from one of his tenants as the fire broke out and drove over to the blaze about 10 minutes after it started. He said it was a very emotional and traumatic experience for his tenants.

"Everyone was holding on to each other, people were crying," Bobechko recalled. "There was one lady who lost her two cats, and I remember her husband just holding on to her."

"She watched the roof of her apartment collapse in with the flames and crashing through the windows. I remember her just wailing in the street," he added.

The local small business owners who operate at the Old Mill Hub began to show up at the same time as Bobechko and were also devastated by what was taking place.

"They showed up with tears in their eyes, just watching their livelihood burn," he said.

As many of the businesses were finally getting back on their feet after facing several setbacks due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, Bobechko said they're really hurting.

"They just feel like they can't catch a break," he told the Citizen. "They need love right now. They need a place to do their day camps, they need a space to do the karate, the art classes, all of that."

If anyone has commercial space that the displaced businesses can rent, they're asked to contact Bobechko at marshalofthemill@gmail.com.

"Please reach out if you were a patron of the Old Mill Hub, formerly known as the Mill Street Mall," he said. "Please reach out to the business owners and give them support, give them love, give them light. If you have a home or an extra space that you can afford to let someone rent from you, or stay there, please reach out to me or the tenants so that we can arrange that."

Tattoo studio destroyed

All That Remains Tattoo Studio, which



SAM ODROWSKI PHOTO

REMAINING STRUCTURE: A fire that started on the roof of 22 Mill St. destroyed the apartments of nine tenants during the early hours of last Thursday. All of the tenants have had their belongings destroyed and many of them don't have insurance to cover their losses.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

EXTINGUISHING REMAINING FLAMES: Fire crews remained on the scene of the blaze until the fire was fully extinguished, around 8 p.m.

has been located at the Old Mill Hub since it opened in 2012, is one of the businesses that was abutting the apartment that burnt down.

The business has lost roughly \$13,000 worth of tattoo equipment and is without a location to service clients.

"A firewall protected us from the actual fire, but the amount of smoke and water damage has totally destroyed everything," said Sandy Carrick, owner of All That Remains.

The tattoo studio is a family business, run entirely by Carrick and his wife, so they're both out of an income until they find commercial space to rent and get back to work.

But Carrick said while his business has been devastated, he's incredibly grateful everybody got out of the fire alive.

"At the end of the day, material items and things like that can be fixed, they can be repaired, but people can't," he remarked. "As long as the people are alive, they survived, that's what matters."

Carrick said he's grateful he didn't lose his home, like the nine tenants of the apartment, but he still has to pay for his home, provide for his children, and currently has no income.

"I'm in a position where I can't really wait, I want to open it. I can't be off for a month, two months," he explained. "I want to be

back to work by mid-September."

With concerns about how soon he can reopen, how much insurance will cover, and when it will be provided, a friend of Carrick's started a GoFundMe, which has raised \$1,120 as of press time.

He said the best way to show support for the business impacted by the fire is by buying their products or services as they reopen.

Impact to Domestic Divas

Domestic Divas, a local cleaning company, had commercial space directly below the apartment fire and lost about \$50,000 worth of equipment in the blaze.

The business's owner, Danielle Jenkins said she was notified of the fire by a friend who's with the Orangeville Fire Service and watched it on a camera setup at her office space. At first it looked like minor water damage leaking through the ceiling but by 1:30 a.m. on Thursday, the camera's cut out as the building was destroyed, Jenkins recalled.

"I watched the ceiling cave in and the place fill up with flames and smoke. I knew then that this was a complete loss, and that it was going to be much worse than I had anticipated," she remarked.

Having a staff of 30 people, Jenkins said she didn't want them to be without a paycheck, so new equipment and supplies

were immediately purchased to get them back to work.

Jenkins stressed that the most important thing about the fire is that nobody got hurt.

She added that she feels for the tenants of 22 Mill St. who are having a much harder time than her, having lost their homes.

"Our business has been disrupted but we still have a home to go to at the end of the day, so any help towards re-homing or helping the residential tenants above us is our number one concern right now," Jenkins explained.

Ways to support

The primary way of supporting the tenants of 22 Mill St. is by dropping off physical or monetary donations to 101.5 FM, located at 45 Mill St., Unit B.

Samantha Sawchyn of 101.5 FM can coordinate donation drop offs and be reached by phone at 226-790-6936 ext. 7531 or email at sarah.sawchyn@localradio.ca.

Another way of supporting all residents of 22 Mill St. is donating here: gofund.me/c9b59b4f

To support Jack Brakel, visit his GoFundMe at: gofund.me/257e9aa2

To support Brandon and Melissa, who lived at 22 Mill St., visit: gofund.me/3085d3ce

All That Remains Tattoo Studio can be supported at: gofund.me/5144b173

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