



Patrick Cafone

CURRENTS

Flames Disrupt Easter Dinner At Gables Inn

B&B Owners Anticipate Memorial Day Reopening

By VICTORIA LASSONDE

"It's scary, how fast things change," Gables Inn sous chef Jeff Hanlon remarked, his expression dazed, still shaken after evacuating the building only an hour earlier. One minute, he was in the kitchen, in the zone; everything was running smoothly, without a single issue or problem. The next, he was standing outside in his white chef's uniform, stunned, watching bright orange flames engulf the roof, not knowing when he would return to work.

At the height of the dinner service on Easter Sunday, a brush fire broke out in the yard behind the historic Victorian bed and breakfast on Centre Street in Beach Haven, and the wind quickly carried the flames up the side of the southeast corner of the building and onto the roof, blackening that portion of the building, substantially damaging the office, parlor and at least three guest rooms on the top two floors.

Dinner guests left their tables in a hurry, some leaving their Easter meals unfinished. Soon, huge crowds of onlookers lined the sidewalk on Centre Street, in front of Buckalew's Restaurant and the Magnolia House bed and breakfast, directly across the street from the Gables. Others gathered and milled about at the two nearest intersections. At least 14 different fire departments responded, and firefighters battled the blaze for almost two hours between 5 and 7 p.m., drawing additional water from the bay to help douse the fire, according to Ocean County Deputy Fire Marshal Bill Hopson, the lead investigator on the case. Everyone, including the inn owners' two dogs, got out safely, no one was injured, and no overnight guests were staying in any of the five guest suites at the time.

"It looks worse than it was," Hopson said Tuesday morning. The damage is predominantly to the exterior, while "the inside is very unaffected," he said. A few embers were blown onto the roof of the Surfflight Theatre, to the immediate east, which impacted some attic space, but otherwise "there was very minimal damage to the Surfflight complex." (See related story.)

An investigation is ongoing, Hopson said, and will remain so until he has the opportunity to conduct another round of interviews with witnesses. As for a possible cause, Hopson said, "I'm not ready to release that (information). I can tell you it was accidental; I am very comfortable with that. ... There is no reason to believe there was anything suspicious."

The use of bay water is a "normal firefighting practice," Hopson said, sometimes as a result of low municipal water supply or sometimes, as in this instance, just to be on the safe side.

Owners Stephen and Sondra Beninati are optimistic about reopening, possibly as soon as Memorial Day weekend, according to Facebook posts. An update they posted on the Gables' web site on Monday afternoon reported: "There was a brush fire that began outside the building that, due to windy conditions, quickly spread to the upper floors. The first floor and our kitchen were unharmed. The construction process has begun, and we should be open by early June."

As of Tuesday morning, a press release from



Patrick Cafone



Holly Fazelat



Patrick Cafone

WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS: (From top, facing page) A fire marshal can be seen in the upstairs window, investigating Monday morning. Shortly after the fire broke out, a dinner patron captured the inferno as it consumed the rear of the structure, while inside, tables dressed in white linens were left hastily emptied. In a haze of smoke, firefighters battled it out on multiple rooftops. (Above) A series of explosions could be heard as small propane tanks exploded, sending debris over the stockade fence. (Right) The most effective tool proved to be the Beach Haven Volunteer Fire Co.'s bucket truck, which enabled firefighters to get enough height to attack the flames from above.

the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce, whose President Chris Schwab's own wedding is booked there June 9, expressed confidence in the Gables' plans to heal and flourish: "The Gables ... will be celebrating its 120th anniversary this May after repairs are complete from this weekend's fire."

The 14 fire companies on the scene included all five on the Island (Beach Haven, Ship Bottom, Surf City, High Point and Barnegat Light), plus Stafford, Warren Grove, Barnegat, Waretown, Eagleswood, Parkertown, Tuckerton, West Tuckerton and Mystic Island. Counting the additional companies throughout the region that provided coverage at the firehouses that went out on the call, Hopson said, brings the total number of participating companies up to about 17.

Beach Haven Volunteer Fire Co. was the primary agency on the call, he said. "Beach Haven did a terrific job of knocking down the flames" that were raging when they first arrived on the scene, he added. Many companies came to offer assistance due to the dry, windy conditions and the age of the building.

The building dates back to 1892 and is believed to have become the first bed and breakfast on Long Beach Island in the 1970s when purchased by Lucy Reddington. It was known as the Green Gables for at least 30 years. Current owners Stephen and Sondra Beninati bought it in 2005; invested in extensive restoration and structural repair work; consolidated the pre-existing 14 bedrooms into five luxury suites, each with period decor and a historically relevant name; and changed the establishment's name to the Gables Inn, today a Zagat-rated (27 on a 30-point scale) upscale restaurant and award-winning wedding destination.

Gables marketing director Sandy Goldsborough pointed out the sad irony that "we were having the best day," from the beautiful weather, to the full reservation book to the busy dining rooms filled with satisfied guests. "We couldn't have asked for a better holiday," she said.

And then disaster struck.

Sondra Beninati said she had been

sitting out back when she noticed the black smoke, and she ran back inside the kitchen, yelling, "Fire! Fire! Get out! Everybody get out!"

It was clear all along the fire had not started in the kitchen. At first,

Sondra imagined it might have started in the roof, in the ventilation system; Steve wondered if it had started in one of the garbage cans out back, Goldsborough said.

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Paul Einreinhofer

Six Employees Find Temporary Housing Elsewhere

Surflight Theatre Complex Touched by Gables Fire

The Easter Sunday blaze that roared through parts of Beach Haven's Gables Inn also damaged a portion of the Surflight Theatre complex located two doors to the east of the inn.

A brisk wind quickly blew a shower of blazing embers from the Gables toward the Surflight's buildings. Within minutes of their arrival on scene, firefighters were hosing down the complex's northernmost structure in an attempt to contain the fire. They were successful in avoiding a catastrophe, but the Surflight property did not escape unscathed.

The exact extent of the damage has yet to be determined.

Surflight Executive Producer Tim Laczynski said on Tuesday that the bulk of the damage apparently occurred to the theater's "tech house," which, as the name implies, is used to house its technical staff. It is located in the same building but to the west of Show Place Ice Cream Parlour.

"There are seven bedrooms upstairs and two downstairs," said Laczynski.

Only six employees, he said, were currently utilizing the housing. In the summer, however, that number swells to 18 to 20.

The theater's insurer, said Laczynski, is still analyzing the damage. Just the possibility of the facility being unusable this summer, though, already has him investigating other housing options.

In the short term, said Laczynski, all is well. He said Kevin Stretch, owner of Stretch Cleaning and Restoration, was quick to come to the rescue. Stretch, he said, owns



Victoria Lassonde

SUPPORTING ROLE: Deputy Fire Marshal Bill Hopson confirmed the west winds blew burning embers onto the Surflight roof. An eyewitness described firefighters using foam to prevent rogue embers from erupting and spreading.

housing in which he puts up his summer employees. It being April, it is currently not being used to capacity, and he jumped at the opportunity to help Surflight by offering to take in the homeless techies.

"I'll help them as long as possible," said Stretch, who added he hoped that would be "a month, month and a half."

Stretch, who was busy Tuesday trying to prevent further damage to the facility ("it's supposed to rain tomorrow"), said the damage was rather extensive. Firefighters, he explained,

had chopped three holes through the roof and broken many windows to pour water into the building in an effort to keep the Gables' blaze from spreading. Surflight's costume shop is located underneath the upstairs apartments. It is possible, said Stretch, that the water poured into the building may have wreaked significant havoc there. But a thorough evaluation by the restoration specialist would have to wait — keeping the elements out of the building was his top priority.

Laczynski said the rest of the complex, which includes the theater

proper, a large cast house built over a scene shop, the yellow "Grey House" that is used to house visiting directors, choreographers, etc. and Show Place, seemed to escape damage, adding that "seemed" was the operative word. He stressed that a complete inspection had still not been completed.

Laczynski did say, though, that the show would go on. "The Rat Pack Review," Surflight's first show of its 2012 season, will open as scheduled on April 18.

— Rick Mellerup

Gables Fire

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Eyewitnesses Commend Fast, Effective Response

Kathy Wik and Patrick Cafone of Yonkers, N.Y., were among the dinner guests evacuated. Both have family-owned vacation homes in Brant Beach and Cedar Bonnet Island. One of the highlights of their holiday weekend on LBI was to be Easter dinner at the Gables – party of 16. Wik knows and loves the Gables’ restaurant and ate Easter dinner there last year; Cafone, a first-timer, made a fuss of admiring the architecture and ornate interior detail. They all enjoyed a tremendous meal, had just settled the bill, and were looking forward to taking a tour of the upstairs when, suddenly, Wik saw Steve Beninati pull the fire alarm and hurry back to the kitchen.

For Wik, a 9/11 widow, the emergency situation brought back painful memories of the tragedy that claimed the life of her husband, who worked for Aon Risk Services on the 92nd floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center and never made it out because he stayed behind to help other victims. Now whenever faced with danger, she doesn’t hesitate to seek safety. “When I hear an alarm, I go,” she said. “We’re all that way.”

For Cafone, who spent eight years in the U.S.

Marine Corps, has worked in construction and now is a security supervisor assigned to Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. headquarters in Manhattan, it was a call to action. His nature and training have well prepared him to control crowds, help people and defuse volatile situations.

During the evacuation process, which fortunately never became frantic or chaotic, Cafone instructed everyone to “walk calmly and quickly” out of the building, cautioning not to run, lest they cause a stampede. The restaurant appeared to be near capacity at about that time, Wik observed, and the only egress was the front door, which leads out to a narrow walkway just about wide enough for a double-file line.

The reason no one panicked is likely because the fire was unnoticeable to anyone in the dining rooms. The smell and smoke floated up and away on the wind.

“It was so strange, not to see or smell anything,” Wik said. “We didn’t know it, or see it, until we got outside.”

Once they got outside, they saw sky-high orange flames and heard explosions that Wik described as “huge booms.” “I’ve never seen flames like that,” she said.

Cafone had stayed back to assist with the evacuation and photograph the event as it unfolded (much to Wik’s chagrin). Making his way outside around

the east side of the building, using a wide-angle lens, he captured shots of propane tanks exploding in the back yard, the force of the blasts sending debris flying over the stockade fence into the back yard of the bagel shop immediately next door. He estimates he got within about 30 feet of the fire, covering his mouth and nose the best he could until he could no longer stand the heat and smoke, eventually resorting to blindly pointing his camera in the general direction of the action.

When Cafone went back Monday morning to shoot more pictures, he counted at least five burned-up propane tanks, the 20-pounders used for barbecue grills. He’ll never forget the sound they made when they went off, the booms and also the loud hiss of rushing gas.

“The emergency response was very fast; I was impressed,” Cafone said. Within minutes, Atlantic City Electric arrived and shut down power to the whole block.

Wik added the people at Buckalew’s Restaurant were also extremely kind and helpful, immediately offering those who were displaced from the Gables to take refuge there.

As Wik and Cafone witnessed, firefighters used a Stafford ladder truck to water down the Gables roof from the north side, while a High Point ladder truck gave them access to the Surflight roof, where they applied firefighting foam, knowing it

was vulnerable to the wild flames. Meanwhile, on the south side of the Gables, a Beach Haven bucket truck parked in the lot behind Murphy’s Market, on Engleside Avenue, fully extending the boom to get the height necessary to dump water directly downward onto the Gables.

“He just attacked (the fire) from above and soaked the hell out of it,” Cafone said.

What About the Weddings?

At about 6:30 p.m. on Sunday, firefighters continued actively fighting the fire from the roof. The sound of glass shattering caught everyone’s attention as firefighters broke out windows to let heat escape. “That’s breaking my heart,” Goldsborough said, observing from the street. Consulting the firefighters on the roof was James Tallent of Tallent Construction, the company that did the renovation work, Sondra pointed out. The men opened holes in the roof to gain access and look for additional dangers or clues as to the fire’s whereabouts or origins.

Once the fire was under control and the Beninatis could assess the damage, Sondra said the first floor, which includes four separate dining rooms and the kitchen, appeared to be relatively unscathed. “The sprinklers never even went off (downstairs) because there was no heat source,” she said.

“The piano is fine,” she said, referring to the innkeepers’ prized Steinway piano (a fully restored, vintage 1932 Queen Anne, Model M, for “medium grand”) that sits in the main entryway. Shortly after, Steve emerged from the building carrying some computers and other valuable items (including Sondra’s pocketbook, much to her relief) that he had successfully salvaged from the wrecked and waterlogged office on the second floor.

“I imagine that Bailey Lloyd is toast,” she said wistfully, referring to the uppermost guest room named for LBI historian John Bailey Lloyd. Fire had eaten through the peak, leaving a charred gaping hole.

In recent years the Gables has become an increasingly sought-after venue for intimate wedding ceremonies and receptions, rehearsal dinners and wedding night lodging, earning recognition as one of the state’s top 10 historic sites for weddings from the wedding powerhouse The Knot and the 2011 Bride’s Choice Award from the online resource Wedding Wire.

The Gables’ popularity as such, which happened “by chance, not design,” according to Sondra, has inspired the successful marketing campaign “Are you a Gables bride?” and last year the Beninatis created a separate website dedicated to the wedding portion of their business, weddingslbi.com.

The fire damage could spell trouble for 2012 Gables brides. At least 12 wedding events are already booked from now through September, according to Goldsborough, the soonest before the end of April.

“There are some things we might still be able to accomplish,” Goldsborough said. ♦

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Forest Fire

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butts, spread and crown rapidly. Spot fires common. All burn fiercely and may blow up unless controlled promptly.”

Martin and Drake had asked the public to be vigilant two weeks ago, and now they are stepping up their warnings. All fires are now banned in the Pinelands – even charcoal cookers are not allowed. Officials also are asking the public to refrain from tossing cigarette butts or matches from car windows, and they urge homeowners to maintain at least a 30-foot buffer zone free of any vegetation around any structure. Finally, they are asking the public to report any suspicious vehicles or persons to the authorities, because arson is “a major cause of forest fires in New Jersey.”

Indeed, the “Winter That Wasn’t” set the table and this spring’s weather pattern of low humidity loaded the forests with food for a fire. And it appears that the spark for most of the past week’s large fires was arson. Drake said on Monday that officials had evidence that both the Tabernacle/Woodland and Camden County fires had been deliberately set.

What is obviously needed is a good, soaking, daylong – or longer – rain. The National Weather Service in Mt. Holly, however, doesn’t see one on the horizon. In fact, on Tuesday morning forecasters issued not only a “red flag” warning for the area from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. but a “hazardous weather outlook” that says “enhanced fire conditions are possible Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday.” ♦

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