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A day they can't forget

A year ago, downtown Douglas was rocked by explosion, fire

By TEREASA NIMS | Staff writer

One year ago today, a historic Douglas building burst into flames, engulfing a salon and four apartments.

"My first thought was holy," said Saugatuck Township Fire District Chief John Blok.

The fire was sparked when George Daily of Douglas, then 90, drove into the building at 32 E. Center St., striking a gas line. The building was later leveled.

For Blok, the fire rates up there toward the top one in his firefighting career.

The explosion that followed resulted when natural gas leaked and ignited.

"We still don't know exactly what the ignition source was," Blok said.

When the call came in, Blok and the other firefighters in the station suited up, took their places on the fire engines and pulled out of the station.

"When we pulled out of the station drive, we could see black smoke," Blok said. "We could see we had a large fire."

Firefighters from Graafschap, Ganges and Fennville helped fight the blaze for two hours, dumping thousands of gallons of water onto the flames. Hamilton firefighters also assisted by standing by to take any Saugatuck fire calls.

For manicurist Mandy Heidenreich, March 29, 2006, is not a day she will soon forget.

About 9:30 a.m. that day, Heidenreich was working inside Center Stage Salon on a client's nails when she heard something hit the building.

Heidenreich went outside to see what happened.

"I saw the severed gas lines and heard this loud whistling," said Heidenreich. "I started screaming for my client to get out."

Heidenreich ran back inside the salon to make sure her client was getting out and to grab her purse.

"The explosion happened about 10 to 15 feet away from where we were," said Heidenreich.

Center Stage Salon owner Scott Kirkby saw flames shooting up from the building as he drove up.

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EXPLOSION: Mandy Heidenreich, (below) a nail technician at Center Stage Salon & Spa in Douglas, was in a building that exploded and burned a year ago, above.

Sentinel/J.R. Valderas



CHANGES: Inset above, Mandy Heidenreich, a nail technician at Center Stage Salon & Spa in Douglas, works on a client's nails at the business's new location at 100 Blue Star Highway in Douglas on Wednesday. Heidenreich was in a building that exploded and burned a year ago, above.

Sentinel/J.R. Valderas



SITE: Scott Kirkby, owner of Center Stage Salon & Spa in Douglas, stands at the former site of his business on Center Street in downtown Douglas.

Sentinel/J.R. Valderas

Kirkby recalls watching all his work go up in smoke, but his second thought that day went to his clients.

"I thought how am I going to take care of my clients' hair?" Kirkby recalled.

That motivated Kirkby to find a new place. The day after the fire Kirkby signed a new lease and was already planning for a new location, eventually at 100 Blue Star Highway.

Steve Salzer, who shared a second-story apartment with his partner, Jack Carey, was inside the building when it exploded.

Salzer awoke that day to books falling from a book shelf and his apartment filling with smoke. Salzer said he had enough time to put on pants, shoes and a jacket.

The flames destroyed all that Salzer and Carey owned, including Salzer's car. The couple has since moved to Saugatuck.

The other renters included Stephen Oswald, Barbara Leonard and Aaron Sheridan. Oswald also moved to Saugatuck, Leonard moved to Ann Arbor and Sheridan moved to Lowell.

None were immediately available for comment.

Allegan District Judge Stephen Sheridan and his wife Tanya Sheridan bought the building in 1990 from Tanya Sheridan's parents.

Tanya Sheridan, who was just two blocks from the building when she got a call that it was on fire, first thought she would come over with a fire extinguisher. She had no idea at first how massive the fire was.

The Sheridans had hopes of rebuilding on the property zoned commercial and residential, but find the property taxes on a new development too steep.

"At this point we have no definite plans," said Stephen Sheridan. "Right now we are at a stand still."

The property taxes on the old building were capped.

Heidenreich thinks about the fire often. Mostly when she remembers what things were lost.

"I will think, 'Oh, I have that,'" Heidenreich said. "Then I will think, 'Oh, I used to have that.'"

But while Heidenreich lost equipment, she said her heart goes to the people who lost more.

"They lost their homes and all their belongings," Heidenreich said.

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