

Thursday, March 30, 2006

## Explosion rocks downtown Douglas

*No one hurt after blaze destroys apartments, business*

**By TEREASA NIMS | Staff writer**

Steve Salzer awoke about 9:30 a.m. Wednesday to books falling off a book case and his second-floor apartment filling with smoke.

"I had enough time to put on my pants, grab my shoes and jacket and get out," said a tearful Salzer later as he watched the building where he lived being consumed by flames.

The fire was sparked when a 90-year-old man drove into Salzer's apartment building at 32 E. Center St. The car hit a gas line, leading to an explosion minutes later.

"I lost everything," Salzer said as he watched firefighters battle the 20-foot flames. In addition to all he and his partner, Jack Carey, owned, the flames also seared Salzer's 2005 Chevrolet Equinox that was parked outside the two-story building.

At 10 a.m., the back end of the car was scorched and a burned balcony collapsed on top of it.

Saugatuck Township District Fire Chief John Blok said firefighters from Saugatuck, Graafschap, Hamilton, Ganges and Fennville fought the blaze for two hours, dumping several thousand gallons of water onto the flames that were being fed by the ruptured gas line. The building was destroyed and will be leveled, he said.

Below Salzer's apartment on the first floor was Center Stage Salon, owned by Scott Kirkby.

Kirkby watched as the front part of the business came crashing down.

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**COMFORT:** Barb Leonard, center, is comforted by friends John Manchester and Pam Aalderink as she arrives at her home which was destroyed by an explosion Wednesday in downtown Douglas.

*Dennis R.J.*

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"I just pulled up to the building about 9:30 a.m. and saw flames on the side of the building," Kirkby said.

Kirkby said a manicurist named Mandy was completing a manicure on a client when she heard the commotion and they all decided to get out of the building.

"She went to reach for her purse when the floor blew up," Kirkby said.

Like all others in or near the building, everyone escaped with explosion and fire without injury.

Raymond Pnana said he was raking leaves in the area when he saw a man hit the gas line with his car. Pnana said the man told him that he went to step on the brake, but mistakenly stepped on the gas. Pnana went over to the man and smelled gas. Both men got away from the building.

Police confirmed the fire was likely caused by the car crashing into the building, but were uncertain as to why the crash occurred.

"We are not sure about him hitting the gas instead of the brake," said Saugatuck-Douglas Police Chief William Giles.

Giles, who would not identify the driver, said the man was not charged, but the crash is under investigation.

The concussion from the blast was heard and felt by residents all through the town.

"It was just a huge explosion that was heard and felt," said Gary Czerwinski, who works at and lives above 13 Hawks Studio across the street from the apartment building. "At first I thought it was from the (nearby) road construction, but then I heard screaming and I looked out the window and saw flames."

Czerwinski showed where the heat from the fire melted the shutters on his studio and bubbled the paint.

Allegan District Judge Stephen Sheridan and his wife Tanya Sheridan owned the building.

"I was at the post office two blocks away when I got the call," Tanya Sheridan said. "Even when I got the call that there was a fire, I just thought I would come down here with a fire extinguisher. I didn't expect this."

"This was my retirement," she said of the building. "I have no idea at this time what



FROM THE GROUND: Firefighters douse the fire in downtown Douglas Wednesday.



AIR ATTACK: Saugatuck Township firefighters extinguish the fire on Center Street in Douglas Wednesday.

*Sentinel/J.R. Valderas*



Saugatuck Township firefighters extinguish a fire at Center Stage Salon in Douglas on Wednesday after the building exploded.

*Sentinel/J.R. Valderas*

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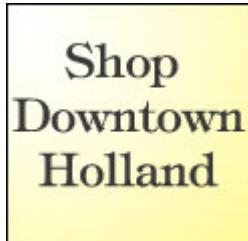
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we will do. I'm still in shock."

Sheridan's son, Aaron, lived in the building.

"I guess he'll be moving back home," she said.

Sheridan expressed concern about the other renters in the building. She was comforting Barb Leonard, a special education teacher at Holland Public Schools who lived in the building.

Harvey Busscher, who owned the building prior to the Sheridans, said he bought the building and turned it into apartments.

"I see all my hard work going up in flames," Busscher said.

Giles said the last major fire in Douglas was about eight years ago when the Douglas Bakery burned. The business was never rebuilt.

For the building's residents, like Carey and Salzer, it means finding a new home and replacing all that was lost.

"We have to start all over," Carey said.

### **What happened**

\* About 9:30 a.m. Wednesday, a man drove his vehicle into the side of the building at 32 E. Center St.

\* The car hit a gas line and an explosion followed.

\* Firefighters from five area departments fought the blaze for hours.

\* The building was destroyed.

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Firefighters from Saugatuck Township, Graafschapp, and Fennville fire departments work together to extinguish a fire at Center Stage Salon in Douglas on Wednesday. (3/29/06)

*Sentinel/J.R. Valderas*



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