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SUNRISE EXPLOSION AFTERMATH

Shopkeepers mind empty stores as wary residents return home

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August 13, 2008

His fermenting vats of wine need to be chilled between four and five degrees Celsius. So when a neighbouring propane facility exploded and sent a mushroom cloud of fire into the night sky, it also cut off power to the coolers in Mario De Liberato's make-your-own wine store and ruined nearly 500 litres of wine.

Mr. De Liberato stood behind the store's counter yesterday, arms akimbo, staring out at the street through a crystal-clear storefront window. The new window was installed Monday after the old one shattered in Sunday's explosion.

"It cost about \$1,000," Mr. De Liberato sighed. "The same as the insurance deductible."

The Wine Emporium, snuggled into a line of family-owned shops on Wilson Avenue near Keele Street, has long been a nexus of the neighbourhood east of what are now the burned remains of Sunrise Propane.

For nearly 15 years, residents of the primarily Italian community have visited Mr. De Liberato's store to continue generations-old family traditions of fermenting homemade wine.

Business has slowed as his customers have aged and their Canadian-born children shop at the LCBO, but Mr. De Liberato said the neighbourhood's abandoned atmosphere since the explosion had his fellow business owners especially worried.

"We don't know what to expect in the next week, the next month, we just don't know," he said.

The row of stores immediately south of streets, which opened to residents only yesterday, resembled a ghost town. No one peered through their windows, perused their aisles or dined at immaculately laid restaurant tables, and the parking lot was nearly empty.

"I honestly expected somebody, either the mayor or the city councillor to be here," Mr. De Liberato said. "That's all people want, is to be able to believe they're going to be taken care of."

Mayor David Miller held a news conference at his office at City Hall yesterday. He pledged to review city zoning laws and work with the provincial government to improve the regulation of propane storage and distribution facilities.

City Councillor Maria Augimeri, whom some residents said they'd contacted regarding concerns over the propane facility, has remained unavailable for comment. A member of her staff said that she would be issuing a statement today.

Residents of all but two blocks were allowed to return to their homes yesterday, as city officials declared that the threat of asbestos had diminished and that all but six homes were structurally sound.

On her first tiptoe through the damage of her home just one block from the propane explosion, Silvana Piazza found the side door flung off its frame and the pocket lights in her sky roof popped from their sockets.

Mysterious powder covered countertops and tables in her corner home at Spalding Road and Garratt Boulevard. But it was the tiny figurine that sent shivers down Ms. Piazza's spine. Her eyes caught the pale pink face of the two-inch Madonna, robed in white, hands clasped in prayer, lying at the foot of a bed in her daughters' room.

She'd fastened the tiny figurine above the door to her eight- and 10-year-old's room to keep watch. Family portraits clung to the walls after the blast that tore through the yard of Sunrise Propane early Sunday morning, but the Madonna fell from her perch.

"It just gave me the shivers. It was so eerie, so creepy," said Ms. Piazza.

She gestured widely as she described the terror of the night she bolted barefoot from her home in track pants and a tank top, flames at her back, screaming for her children who were staying at her mother-in-law's next door.

Two days later, charred debris flecks the sprawling yards and neatly kept flower gardens on these streets near the perimeter of the blast. Shingles are curled up, siding torn off.

Neighbours don't know if it's safe to step on the grass, whether the debris on their parked cars is asbestos.

Indeed, it's not the spoiled food and household damage that dogs her return to the neighbourhood where she grew up, said Ms. Piazza, her spunky tone subdued. It's the fear.

"I feel like it is so scary to be in here, I don't feel safe in here now," she said outside her house.

"The innocence has been taken from us in this neighbourhood. It's our innocence. We thought we were safe."