

# Picking up the Pieces

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It took Kelly O'Brien several decades to amass his collection of antiques, fine art, and stained glass windows.

But after a devastating fire, everything is covered in thick, black soot. The glass windows exploded. The art melted. Smoke damage has reached every crevice of the house.

"I don't make a ton of money, but over the years I have collected a lot," Kelly said. "Each piece is special."

He also lost the most important thing of all: his beloved dog, Sydney, who died of smoke inhalation.

The 15-year Orcas resident woke up to screams of "fire!" on the morning of Jan. 25 at his house on Hemlock Street. Four of his five tenants were also home at the time. One man jumped out of a second story window, injuring his back. A nine-year-old boy crawled out of a window and waited on the porch roof until he could climb down a ladder.



COLLEEN ARMSTRONG PHOTOS  
The fire on Hemlock Street.

Within six minutes of the 911 call, firefighters arrived at the scene. By that time, black smoke was boiling out of the top floor and flames were shooting from the back windows. Although a first floor room was completely involved, firefighters were able to knock it back and keep it from spreading to the rest of the home.

Twenty-six firefighters waged an aggressive, 30-minute attack on the fire. They were able to save 80 percent of the structure, but smoke damage left most of its contents ruined.

"It is heavily damaged," firefighter Maxx Jones said. "Every single thing is covered in a thick layer of black soot. It's absolutely unlivable."

The cause of the fire is still under investigation, but Jones said it could have been a heater in a ground floor bedroom.

"It's hard to tell because there was so much damage done to the room," she said.

Julie Polyanski had a two-month rental with O'Brien, and she hopes the fire serves as a reminder for people to establish a fire escape plan with a place to meet – and to change the batteries in smoke detectors.

“You don’t really listen, but it’s exactly true what they say – you don’t have any time. You couldn’t see your hand in front of your face. You can’t imagine until you live through it,” she said. “It was two minutes between the time we saw the fire and had to get out. You don’t have time.”

She says the soot and smoke were immediate.

“You couldn’t see, you couldn’t breathe. It was nauseating, gagging; it was black. A couple breaths of that stuff would kill you. It was plastic, sooty, thick, strangulating, almost like liquid tar in the air.”

O'Brien has homeowners' insurance, but is not sure if it covers his possessions. He bought the house five years ago, and has rented out the extra rooms. Many know O'Brien from his time as a waiter at Christina's and Ecotopian, which is currently closed until the spring.

Just hours after the fire, the Orcas community sprang into action.

The Red Cross arranged lodging at the Outlook Inn for three days (the inn donated two of the nights) and established disbursement orders at Island Market, the consignment store Aurora Company, and Ray's Pharmacy.

“It’s been amazing, the outpouring of love and help, people going out of their way,” Polyanski said. “Staying at the Outlook has been healing. Kelly is a great guy ... He is so well loved, and for good reason.”

Orcas Angels set up an account at Islanders Bank, the Exchange donated clothing, Windermere has been serving a drop-off spot for donations, and Island Market gave \$50 to each roommate to buy groceries.

Orcas Angels co-founder Liz Longworth says O'Brien has a garage and apartment on his land that he's been trying to finish for years.

“It was not damaged by the fire, so we're looking to help finish it,” she said. “Orcas Angels would pay for the supplies, but we need contractors to donate their time. We could have that place done in six weeks. If we can pool together the community resources, we could give him a home again.”

## **How to help**

Eric Beemer of Beemer Building Company is project manager for the completion of O'Brien's garage/apartment. To donate time or materials, call the Orcas Angels at its 24-hour, toll-free number, 1-800-420-4542, or visit [www.orcasangels.org](http://www.orcasangels.org).

To find out what sizes of clothing are needed, call local Red Cross representatives Mairi Stagg at 376-4593 or Bea vonTobel at 376-4462.

*Meredith Griffith contributed to this story.*

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