

Long After Fire, a Family Yearns to Feel at Home

By **STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM**

In the first quiet hours of Aug. 15, 2003, during the largest power failure in American history, Denise Powell lay dreaming in her steamy apartment in Ocean Hill, Brooklyn. The flame of a solitary candle flickered in the living room; her youngest son, Bilal Miller, was asleep in his bedroom.

Morning was only beginning to creep in when a persistent beep ruined the peace. Roused from her sleep, Ms. Powell stayed in bed at first, judging the noise to be coming from a phone or a clock. It never occurred to her that it could be coming from the smoke detector.

"So I just laid there," said Ms. Powell, 39.

But the sound was too irritating to ignore. She reluctantly got up and went in search of the offending object only to find smoke rising from a living room chair piled with clothes. When she pushed the clothes aside, flames leapt up like water from a fountain. She tried to stomp them out, but to no avail.

The lighted candle had fallen onto the chair, igniting it. Panicked, Ms. Powell forgot that she had given her three older children permission to play with neighbors.

"I'm calling for them, and I don't hear nobody," Ms. Powell said. "All I can think about is the children."

Finding only Bilal, now 10, Ms. Powell grabbed him and ran out of the apartment, descending three flights of stairs into darkness. On the sidewalk, she saw the rest of her children playing with neighbors, unaware that their home for the last 10 years was burning.

Firefighters smashed open Ms. Powell's windows and knocked holes in the walls. The wooden floor was so soaked from hose water that it began to warp.

Ms. Powell could save nothing, not even the box that held her grandmother's and mother's ashes.

"I was waiting to get an urn with their names on it," she said quietly.

Among the objects lost were a china cabinet, a living room set, a box full of photographs and the children's academic awards.

"I lost a lot of things of sentimental value to me," Ms. Powell said, "a lot of things that I can't replace."

Ms. Powell's youngest child, Tiaire, now 1, was in St. Mary's Hospital in Brooklyn, where she was recovering from jaundice. Now there was no home for her to return to. Ms. Powell set about finding a place for her family to live while the apartment was being repaired.

"My mother's gone, my grandmother's gone," Ms. Powell said. "Who's going to take a mother and

her five children?"

Unable to afford a hotel room, Ms. Powell moved her family into the Harriet Tubman Family Living Center in Manhattan.

"The most difficult thing was readjusting," Ms. Powell said. "You don't have none of your own things. It was really hard."

Their quarters were cramped — there were two rooms for the six of them — and the children had to wake up at 5:30 each morning to commute to schools in Brooklyn.

After about nine months, the family returned to their apartment. But it does not look like home. The living room is bare but for an empty table and two second-hand couches. One has collapsed into itself, a cruel parody of a smile, and yellow foam peeks out from the gashes in the fabric of its arms. The other couch, a broken love seat, retains few springs and is covered with a sheet.

Replacing all that was lost is impossible, not only because much of it was of sentimental value, but also because Ms. Powell, a single mother, does not have a job. She is unable to work because of health problems including diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure and a thyroid ailment. She

The apartment is repaired, but living there is not the same.

cannot stand or sit for long periods of time.

Ms. Powell's rent, which is about \$1,040 a month, is paid for by a Section 8 voucher and by welfare. She feeds herself and her children with \$500 a month in food stamps.

The family are sleeping on old mattresses on the floor, as their beds were casualties of the fire.

But with the help of the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service and The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, that is about to change.

In the fall, Ms. Powell contacted the Brooklyn Bureau, one of seven charities supported by the Neediest Cases, looking for help.

The bureau was able to use \$400 from the fund to purchase five beds and mattresses for the family.

"When your kids want something and you can't get it for them, it's really hard," Ms. Powell said, sitting next to a hip-high Christmas tree that she had pushed up against a wall.

There was not much money for Christmas gifts this past year, she said. But there is one thing that the children are really looking forward to in the new year: a good night's sleep.



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Denise Powell with her daughter Tiaire in their Brooklyn home, furnished with shabby replacements for belongings lost in a fire in 2003.

