

A heartfelt thanks for 2 lives saved

Commack unit got couple out of April house blaze

BY JOHN ASBURY

john.asbury@newsday.com

East Northport resident Evelyn Cohen woke up in the middle on an April night to the smell of smoke, gasping for air as she opened a window.

The home Cohen, 77, shared with her husband, Harold, 76, was ablaze. Flames licking up the back of the Penfield Drive split-level were strong enough to trigger a neighbor's doorbell camera. Cohen called for her husband while struggling to breathe through a bedroom window, but her screams were stifled by dark billowing smoke.

The couple's home was destroyed and it took the life of their pet cat, but they both survived, courtesy of Commack firefighters who arrived just after 3 a.m. April 22 and put their lives at risk to save the Cohens'.

On Tuesday night, after months of hospitalization and rehabilitation for smoke inhalation, the Cohens visited the Commack firehouse to thank

Third Assistant Chief Christopher Ciaccio and other rescuers and recall that harrowing predawn ordeal.

"I'm so happy to finally meet the man who saved my life," Cohen said to Ciaccio after she and her husband arrived at the firehouse on Jericho Turnpike.

The Cohens and members of the fire department planned the visit as a surprise for Ciaccio during Tuesday night's fire district meeting. Cohen hugged Ciaccio, and other firefighters presented her with flowers.

"It was a surreal experience tonight and great to see her up and well," Ciaccio said. "We never really see the outcome after we get on to the trucks and wait for the next alarm."

The Cohens are now living in a hotel with only their clothes and a few belongings while they wait to hopefully recover what was lost in the fire through insurance, as well as \$514,000 needed to rebuild their home.

Cohen said the fire changed her perspective on life, leading her to think positively after having to learn to talk and breathe again after she was on a ventilator from the fire.

"I've come a long way. When



Evelyn and Harold Cohen thanked Third Assistant Chief Christopher Ciaccio and other members of the Commack Fire Department for their rescue from a house fire in April. ■ Video: [newsday.com/commack](https://www.newsday.com/commack)

I say I came alive again, that's how I feel," Cohen said. "I know I have family and friends and love and health. These are the things there is no price for. I don't have things, but they'll come. I have one pair of shoes and they're getting me around."

Nearly three months back, Ciaccio and his crew of Commack firefighters, who were the first to respond to the blaze, arrived to find the Cohens' home in flames. Neighbors who called 911 reported the couple was inside.

Firefighter Andy Stiles pried open the front door with a crowbar. Ciaccio crawled

through the flames and up the stairs, where he found Cohen in a bedroom. He lifted her out of the eight-foot window and handed her over to Suffolk County police officers, who used a neighbor's ladder to bring her down.

Cohen said she suddenly felt the firefighter lift her up and out of the window to a waiting police officer. Other firefighters helped her husband to safety from a back room.

"I want to convey my heartfelt thank you from the bottom of my heart and my soul for not only me, but my family and my friends who prayed for me to

pull through," Cohen said. "None of their prayers would come into play if I hadn't gotten out of my bedroom window. So again, thank you. You are my hero."

Ciaccio said he waded through fire from the front door and crawled through flames as the kitchen, hallway and living room were ablaze.

He looked back at a wall of flames behind him after he rescued Cohen.

"When you're going through it, you're not thinking about much," Ciaccio said. "This is the reason we push ourselves through training."

\$3.1M revitalization grant for planned Baldwin apartments

BY JOHN ASBURY

john.asbury@newsday.com

Gov. Kathy Hochul announced the award of \$3.1 million Wednesday to developers of the Baldwin Commons apartments as part of a cornerstone of the downtown Baldwin revitalization project.

The funding is part of \$104 million issued to 16 projects statewide to promote affordable housing. Baldwin will receive the \$3.1 million on top of \$10 million the state awarded in a downtown revitalization grant for the hamlet to trans-

form its main corridor in the area of Grand Avenue.

The proposed \$16 million Baldwin Commons project by Park Grove Development at 785 Merrick Rd. would add 33 new apartments aimed at commuter and workforce housing within a quarter-mile of the LIRR station.

Community members and developers have tried for decades to overhaul downtown Baldwin and attract new businesses and apartments centered around the LIRR train station.

Local leaders hope that the new project, which must still be approved by the Hempstead

Town Board, could be the beginning of long-stalled development between Merrick Road and Sunrise Highway.

"It's not perfect, but it's something substantial to have the community look forward to," Baldwin Civic Association president Darrien Ward said. "I hope it may give other investors the motivation who may not have been gung-ho about development here. This may be the impetus this can happen."

Park Grove is planning to build a 32,000 square-foot four-story building on the half-acre property, offering apartments

for about 60% of the area's median income and reserving 30% of apartments for seniors, according to the Town of Hempstead Industrial Development Agency. The IDA also granted tax benefits under a PILOT, or payment in lieu of taxes, last year.

The town rescinded a moratorium in April that would have halted development until it could be approved by board members to ensure projects fit various zoning and parking requirements.

"The success of the new projects will help the revitaliza-

tion of the area that we are all looking forward to," Hempstead Supervisor Donald X. Clavin said in a statement.

Kyle Strober of the Association for a Better Long Island said the project would help retain a young workforce and businesses seeking new employees.

Legis. Debra Mulé (D-Freeport) said Baldwin has been working to transform its downtown for 20 years.

"This is exactly the type of development Baldwin has been asking for," she said. "If done the correct way, it can really move Baldwin forward."