

HTH Restoration Brings a Fresh Start — One Family at a Time

The first warning that something was wrong came from the dog. Four-year old Sheba, a black lab, started barking furiously at 2:30 a.m. in another part of the house. Don Harmon and his wife Jan both sat up in bed trying to shake the sleep off. Their pulse immediately shot up to alert level as they realized this was not just an annoying interruption to their sleep, but a serious situation. An intruder? They got out of bed and headed to the door. Just as they were turning the knob, the first of the smoke detectors started its shrill scream.

The acrid smell of burning house was already starting to drift into the second floor hallway. Their three children were sleeping nearby. John, 5, and Eric, 7, shared a room across the hall, and Amy, 12, was down at the other end. Don rushed into the boys' room while Jan ran to Amy's room. Within seconds, they had everyone's slippers on and were soaking some washcloths in the hall bath to use as makeshift breathing masks. The only escape was down the same staircase that was bringing the burning stench up to where they were. Don switched on the hall lights and told everyone they needed to move NOW, and not panic because of the smoke. Once down the stairs, they had a clear shot out the front door. The kids went first, then Jan was next along with Sheba the hero dog, and finally Don, who paused long enough to glance over his shoulder and catch a glimpse of the orange flames dancing everywhere in the kitchen. He grabbed his mobile phone from the hallway table and was out the door.

The fire department arrived within ten minutes and immediately started operations. By this time, fire had spread across the ceiling and was working its way up the staircase, fueled by the wooden bannister and steps. A ladder crew broke through some of the upstairs windows to create a vent, while the primary attack crew went through the front door and started dousing the staircase. A secondary team went across the back deck and broke through the kitchen door to attack the fire there. Within five minutes of opening the nozzles, the flames were out. Another crew brought in smoke ejectors, powerful fans that were placed in a couple of the upstairs windows to exhaust the smoke, steam, and foul air.

The fire department stayed long enough to provide a cursory cleanup, vacuuming the excess water from the floors and moving burned furniture outside. There wasn't much else they could do, and they had to get their equipment back to operational status as soon as possible. After all, this might not be the only call they got this night. Don

thanked them, and they left. The fire department's ordeal was over for tonight. For the Harmons, the ordeal of pulling their life back together had just begun.

Before the fire department left, Don asked if they would go with him back into the house to gather clothing and some essentials. Since the power had been turned off as a safety precaution, he used their powerful flashlights to grab what he could. Neighbors offered their guest rooms, and the Harmons finally settled into an exhausted sleep for a couple of hours.

Daylight brought the harsh reality of their situation into clear view. The house had not suffered substantial structural damage. That was fortunate. The main damage was confined to the sheetrock and trim, kitchen cabinets and appliances, and the staircase, which was still safe enough to use, but needed to be replaced nonetheless.

The bigger problem was the smoke damage. As anyone who has ever had a fire in their home will tell you, smoke gets *everywhere*, even with a small fire. There wasn't a square inch of the Harmon's house or belongings that didn't reek of that distinctive house fire smell.

Jan's parents lived nearby and arrived to survey the damage, commiserate with their daughter, and take the kids and Sheba back to their place for the next couple of days.

About an hour later, the claims rep from their insurance company arrived. He offered reassuring words and set about to survey the damage. He explained that reconstruction of the damaged sections would be the easy part. The burned items would simply be removed and replaced by new construction material and appliances. However, that was not true of their personal belongings and anything else not directly touched by the flames. These would have to be brought back to their pre-smoke condition, which was a much more extensive undertaking. They needed someone who really knew what they were doing to handle this task properly.

The insurance adjuster told Don and Jan about HTH Restoration, and said they had done excellent work on a number of similar fire scenes. He pointed out that HTH had become the disaster-cleanup service of choice for most of the major home insurers in their area, and they had established a streamlined procedure for filing and processing claims. He offered to arrange a time for a claims adjuster to stop by and provide an estimate, telling the Harmons that they could always get more estimates to see who they liked best.

That afternoon, Jeff Markel from HTH visited the house and did a walk through with the Harmons, while he took pictures and notes. "It was pretty typical of what you find in similar residential fires," he said. "Most of the chemical components of the smoke are the same from house to house, and we've developed a very effective procedure for removing these chemicals, using proprietary cleaning mixes and special techniques we've developed down through the years."

The Harmons were impressed by Jeff's professional, yet friendly and supportive demeanor. He patiently answered their questions and gave them a realistic picture of what to expect. "We can clean anything as well as anyone else," he explained, "but customers have to realize that certain things are beyond anyone's control. For instance, paper items that have been exposed to sufficient heat will curl and char, and there is no fix for that. In the same way, heavily upholstered furniture is likely to hold some of the odor deep within the fabric, no matter how much we go over it. And this odor might linger for the life of the piece, although it will be faint. Basically, we say that we can bring most items back to 95% of their new condition, as long as there is no material damage."

Don and Jan gave HTH the green light to go forward. Jeff Markel explained that they wanted to return the house to habitable status as quickly as possible. As such, they would begin in the bedrooms, baths, and closets. The kitchen and other sections that were damaged by the fire would wait until the remodeling contractor could remove all of the burned and charred material.

The next morning a crew from HTH arrived and began the coordinated process of cleaning all the surfaces, as well as certain household items such as books and some personal items. The carpets would be cleaned last. Deciding what gets cleaned is often a matter of practicality and expedience. For example, clothing is usually left for the homeowner since they can wash or dry-clean everything that was touched by the smoke just as easily as a restoration service can. However, cleaning books is tedious and time consuming. HTH has special "dry" cleaners that can safely be used on delicate paper and leather bindings, so it is much better for them to handle that chore, rather than have the homeowner attempt to clean each book with a damp rag.

"It was fascinating to see them in action," said Jan Harmon. "They came in like a commando cleaning team! Each person knew their job and got right to it. I didn't want to get in their way, but it was interesting to watch, so I hung around probably more than I should," she laughed.

The HTH team was there all that day and most of the next. By the time they were finished, they had cleaned every surface in the house that wasn't directly damaged by the fire, as well as all the Harmon's belongings that could benefit from their unique and specialized processes. This included the carpeting, which went through a heavy-duty cleaning, followed by a unique odor-eliminating process. They would now have to wait until the contractors had replaced all the damaged structural elements before they could finish the remaining cleaning. That would take another couple of weeks.

"I was amazed at the difference when they were done," said Jan. "The sections they cleaned were fresher and newer than they had ever been when it was up to me, I'm embarrassed to say!"

It took two months for the Harmons to get their home and life back in order. It was never conclusively proven what caused the fire. The best explanation, based on forensics, was that electrical circuitry at the back of the refrigerator overheated and set the surrounding dust and floor lint on fire, which then spread. But no one was ever completely sure.

"This was certainly a traumatic jolt to our lives," said Don Harmon. "But the kindness of neighbors and the professionals who came to rebuild our home turned the experience around and made it endurable. Certainly, HTH Restoration had the major part to play, because of the way they were able to remove the lingering evidence of the fire. And once the evidence was gone, the memories of that tragic night started fading away, too."