

SPECIAL REPORT

Healing, rebuilding at site of natural gas accident

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Nearly five years after a natural gas explosion took seven lives, a new residential-retail building has risen on the Bloor Street West site, while a dedication ceremony next month for those lost furthers the healing.

Grieving family, friends and neighbours have laid flowers for years on the formerly barren property on the southwest corner of Bloor and Poplar Avenue west of Kipling Avenue, described by one resident as "an open wound" in the close-knit residential community.

A private developer has since built on the site, and provided space to build a memorial garden.

"I promised the owner from Day One that whatever I built here, something would be done to remember the people who died," new owner, private developer Manny Pereira said yesterday.

Dora Carambelas, 60, Tina Kirkimtzis (nee Carambelas), 32, longtime resident Robert Fairley, 50, esthetician Irene Miyama, 52,

as well as hair salon clients Adele Brown, 73, Elizabeth Roy, 74 and Lillian Guglietti, also known as Lillian Goulet, 73, were killed in the explosion on April 24, 2003.

Soheil Mosun Ltd., a local custom architectural fabrication firm that custom designed, manufactured and installed the solid bronze replacement window frames in the Library of Parliament in Ottawa, is creating the plaque and two benches for the site's memorial garden.

A dedication ceremony and memorial service to mark the fifth anniversary will be held at the site on Saturday, April 19 starting at 10 a.m.

The explosion killed seven people, injured four others and razed the 3885-3887 Bloor St. W. strip plaza of businesses and apartments.

Pereira purchased the property in the fall of 2005, after plans by the city to purchase the site and develop it into a park fell through.

Ward 5 (Etobicoke-Lakeshore) Councillor Peter Milczyn said recently he had hoped the city would purchase the property and turn it into a community park. But he

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— new owner, Manny Pereira



Guardian photo/ IAN KELSO

NEW BEGINNINGS: A new residential complex has been built on the corner of Bloor Street at Poplar on the site of a gas explosion that demolished a small strip mall.

lauded the commitment of Pereira, Soheil Mosun Ltd. and community fundraising to realize the memorial garden.

Pereira conceptualized, and then with the help of his architect BHV Consultants, built a three-storey building of five residential units ranging from 1,200- to 1,800-square-foot, and two retail stores that front onto Bloor Street West.

All but one residential suite has

been rented. Pereira said he and his family plan to live in one of the units.

Honeybunch Homestore for Kids, a baby and children's clothing shop, opened earlier this month in one of the building's retail units. A sports medicine therapist plans to rent the other retail unit, Pereira said.

"Business has been quite good," Honeybunch owner Nicole Morell said yesterday. "Local moms say they

like to see a store within walking distance of their homes. I think a lot of people have been curious about what was being built here."

Pereira said the community has embraced his development.

"I know the community was disappointed that a memorial park wasn't built," Pereira said. "But people in the neighbourhood have been excited to see something being built here."

Safety regulator, ministry of labour appeal ruling in deadly explosion

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Ontario's fuel safety watchdog and the Ontario Ministry of Labour (MOL) have appealed a judge's dismissal of charges against two companies in a natural gas pipeline explosion that killed seven people in a Bloor Street West strip mall nearly five years ago.

Warren Bitulithic Ltd. pleaded guilty in 2006 to damaging an underground natural gas pipeline without permission and was fined \$225,000 in the same case.

Technical Standards and Safety Association and the provincial MOL appealed the provincial court trial judge's dismissal of charges last October against the remaining defendants: Enbridge Gas Distribution Inc. and its subcontractor Precision Utility Ltd.

Both companies were charged with failure to provide as accurate information as possible regarding the location of underground gas pipelines.

"The decision made by the trial judge was to throw the charges out against the two other defendants on a technicality," TSSA spokesperson Dave Lisle said yesterday. "We've filed an appeal of the judge's decision. The decision on that appeal is still before the courts."

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— Dave Lisle, TSSA spokesperson

Ministry of Labour spokesperson Bruce Skeaff said yesterday at a first appearance at Ontario Superior Court on Feb. 11, the court ordered a deadline of November for the filing of materials related to the appeal.

The appeal hearing will commence following the materials' filing, Skeaff said.

The charges against the two companies are not criminal in nature, and are being prosecuted by Ontario's fuel regulator, TSSA. Charges carry a maximum \$1 million fine.

"We're still pursuing the case with the same vigor," TSSA's Lisle said of the appeal. "We've not lost our call to action on this file. We want to make sure people get the message and take this very seriously."

Enbridge and Precision also face health and safety charges laid by the Ontario labour ministry that carry a maximum \$500,000 fine.

Ontario labour ministry charges against a Precision employee will be heard at the Ontario Court of Justice in Toronto on April 17.

The explosion on April 24, 2003 destroyed a strip mall housing four businesses and five apartments above on Bloor Street West, west of Kipling Avenue, killing seven people and injuring four.

It was the largest loss of life ever from a pipeline explosion in Canada.

VICTIMS OF APRIL 24, 2003

Seven people were killed, four others injured, in a natural gas explosion on April 24, 2003 that razed a Bloor Street West strip plaza of businesses and apartments. It was the largest loss of life ever from a pipeline explosion in Canada.

- Dora Carambelas, 60
- Carambelas' daughter Tina Kirkimtzis (nee Carambelas), 32
- Robert Fairley, 50
- Irene Miyama, 52
- Adele Brown, 73
- Elizabeth Roy, 74
- Lillian Guglietti, also known as Lillian Goulet, 73.

TIMELINE

Looking back five years, these are the major events following that fateful day.

- April 24, 2003 — Explosion kills seven, injures four
- November 27, 2003 — TSSA charges three companies in connection with the explosion
- April 23, 2004 — Ontario labour ministry charges two companies
- Fall, 2005 — Strip mall owners sell site to a private developer
- Jan. 3, 2006 — Trial begins against three companies
- Oct. 12, 2006 — Warren Bitulithic Ltd. pleads guilty; fined \$225,000
- March, 2008 — Construction completed of three-storey building of five condo units and two retail stores onsite April 19, 2008 at 10 a.m. — City holds memorial service to mark five-year anniversary
- Present — TSSA appeals judge's ruling against Enbridge Gas and its subcontractor, Precision Utility Ltd.
- Future — Inquest may be held once court proceedings concluded

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