

Illegal work fueled fire

INVESTIGATORS FIND ADDITIONS TO HOME IN EAST P.A. MADE FATAL BLAZE WORSE

Report says construction that violated safety codes helped flames spread, killing two members of the Sanft family.

By **Jessie Seyfer**
Mercury News

A Christmas Day house fire that claimed the lives of two East Palo Alto children was made worse by illegal construction that violated city fire and building codes, according to a Menlo Park Fire Protection District report released Tuesday.

The report of the fire district's investigation into the deadly blaze at 2590 Emmett Way confirms what officials had already theorized caused the fire and discusses factors that

encouraged it to spread.

The report says the blaze was accidental and describes in gruesome detail how it engulfed the East Palo Alto home and how 13-year-old Lucy Sanft and her 5-year-old nephew Hopate were left behind as other family members escaped.

There were no smoke detectors in the crowded home, where 12 people lived.

Sometime before 1997, the Sanft family had built an addition to the home to create a family room and two bedrooms. A section of the home's vinyl siding became an interior wall. Fire investigators believe the siding may have contributed to the fire's rapid spread. Two more bedrooms had been created using "non-rated partitions" in the garage



A memorial to Lucy and Hopate Sanft was created in front of the East Palo Alto home that burned Christmas Day. Illegal construction accelerated flames, investigators found.

RICK E. MARTIN
— MERCURY NEWS

area, the report said.

In conclusion, "Fire travel was encouraged due to construction additions which had not been approved by either building or fire code requirements," the report says.

Upon hearing the fire district's

findings, East Palo Alto Mayor Pat Foster said the city is constrained when it comes to enforcing building code rules.

"The health and safety of our resi-

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dents is a priority of ours; however, we lack the resources to enforce our policies," said Foster, who last week called a city council meeting to discuss illegal additions. "We're doing all we possibly can."

The report also explains how family members escaped, and how firefighters came to find the children.

Just before 5 a.m., Villiami Sanft, 26, Hopate's brother, was asleep in the front living room with his brothers Hopate, 3-year-old Angitau and 11-year-old Sosia when he was awakened by heat on his back, the report says. Villiami Sanft called out to warn other family

members and tried to gather all three children in a blanket and move them outside through a side door because the front door was blocked by fire, the report says. More family members escaped.

The fire grew, and family members realized Lucy and Hopate were missing. They tried to enter Lucy's bedroom but were knocked back by heavy smoke and heat, the report states.

When firefighters arrived, a crowd was screaming that chil-

dren were trapped in the house.

Reaching the bedroom where Lucy had slept, firefighters "search the room on their hands and knees coming face to face with Lucy Sanft, who is lying face up on the floor partially under a bed with some bedding pulled over her," reads the report.

"They lift the limp girl off the floor," the report continues. "They recall she lets out a single groan."

Firefighters carried her out, "falling at least half a dozen

times over the hose, debris and Hopate Sanft." The 5-year-old had become partially buried in the front hallway, not far from where he had fallen asleep, waiting for Christmas morning to arrive.

Firefighters began cardiopulmonary resuscitation on Lucy and continued looking for Hopate. Suddenly they spotted a small leg amid the debris. Firefighters brought him outside to begin CPR.

At 5:56 a.m., Hopate was pronounced dead. Lucy was taken



Hopate
Found in hallway.



Lucy
Trapped in bedroom.

to Stanford Medical Center and was taken off life support the next day.

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