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Little girl killed, dozens lose homes as fire devastates Jamaica slums

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A grandmother's grief: Cynthia Bryan recounts the horror of the fire that killed her 10-year-old granddaughter, Fiddie, as she slept.

KINGSTON, Jamaica — Cynthia Bryan stands among the charred remains of the room where her granddaughter, 10-year-old Nikoa Inglewood, was trapped and killed by fire as she slept. The flames were so hot and devoured her apartment building so quickly that would-be rescuers had to turn back. In all, the fire left 44 people, including 20 children, homeless.



Fiddie Inglewood

As she recalls the happy, friendly girl who family and friends affectionately called "Fiddie," the grandmother's black eyes shine proudly. "She loved school. Loved everything about God. She would always try to teach the children before Sunday school."

Her grandmother says Fiddie "was very special in our area" — a corner of Majesty Gardens, a sprawling inner-city slum where she lived in a tiny, decrepit apartment with her mother, father and three siblings.

House fires are common in poor communities, where tightly packed buildings offer little safety: when one home catches fire, others quickly follow until only ashes are left. People inhabiting these buildings, who have little to begin with, typically lose everything they own.

Homeless and heartbroken

Since the August 2001 fire, Fiddie's family has been grappling with more than their grief. They have been literally torn apart by homelessness.

"I don't really live nowhere directly anymore," Paulette Inglewood, Fiddie's mother, says. She casts her eyes down in shame. Paulette and her husband Selvin, have been forced to send their surviving children to stay with relatives because their living situation is so unstable.

For months, Paulette, Selvin and the fire's other victims have been "couching" — a Jamaican slang term for "staying" — with

friends, family and neighbors with a bed, sofa or even a spot on the floor where they can sleep.

The Inglewoods, like most of Majesty Gardens' more than 8,000 other residents, were struggling even before the fire made them homeless. Selvin worked construction when he could (Jamaica's 16 percent unemployment rate made finding jobs difficult), and Paulette earned a very modest living selling household items.



A father's tears: Remembering his dead daughter, Fiddie, Selvin Inglewood sobs.

The fire destroyed all they had, including about \$200 worth of items for Paulette's business. This loss represented months of income for the family. In a tragic irony, highly combustible floor polish Paulette had just purchased added to the fire's ferocity.

Without stock to sell, Paulette has watched her little business die. "That doesn't matter. It only matters about my child," she says.

She drops her head and begins to sob. "I tried to save her. But no one could go in that house." Pulling her shirt off her shoulder, Paulette displays a jagged black wound — the mark of her anguished attempt to rescue her daughter.

She says she has no idea how the family is going to replace their home. Neither Paulette nor Selvin has worked since the fire, and Fiddie's siblings have not returned to school because the family can't afford to provide the

bus fare and lunch money to send them.

"It's a very hard road," Paulette says, sighing heavily. She wipes her eyes, red and swollen from crying, on her tattered shirt.

Burned-out families fight rats for food

Not far away on Charlotte Street, in another slum area, Charmaine Campbell, 32, is fighting against rats that invade the abandoned Colgate toothpaste factory where she was forced to move with her three children after fire destroyed their shack.

"You afraid, especially when night come. Because rats bite everything," she says. Even herself and her children, she admits, wincing.

"Most of the nights I just watch for rats. I can't go to sleep," she says. She explains that a large rubbish heap next to the building helps attract armies of the vermin, which she describes as "as big as mangoes."

The little family — Charmaine and children Kadin, 5, Osheena, 8, and Shanelle, 10 — shares a 20-foot-by-20-foot space with 20 other

people burned out by the same blaze. They sleep at night on mattresses provided by international Christian charity Food For The Poor, Inc.

Food, usually only a meal or two a day, comes either from Food For The Poor or a nearby school. The crumbling building floods whenever it rains, despite the plastic sheeting the squatters have placed over the numerous cracks in the walls and roof.

Charmaine earns about \$2 a day selling juice on the street. Like many Jamaicans struggling to survive in the country's dismal economy, she can't find better work. "I would love to learn to do anything to earn a living. I would like a nice living and some food and clothing."

What about a house? "Oh, I can't ever afford that," Charmaine says without hesitation. "Not ever."

As weeks in the building have turned into months, Charmaine says she feels more and more desperate. "One night, my youngest daughter say, 'Mummy, this is bad. When we gonna come outta here?' I just say, 'Baby, I don't know.'"

"Sometimes, we all just sit down together and cry," she says sadly.



Nowhere else to go: Osheena Campbell, 8, longs for the day her family can leave the crumbling building they have been living in since fire destroyed their home last August.