

The Fire that Saved Rosie's Place

IN APRIL 1984, IN BOSTON'S RAPIDLY GENTRIFYING SOUTH END, A SUSPICIOUS FIRE TORE THROUGH THE NATION'S FIRST SHELTER FOR HOMELESS WOMEN. IF IT WAS MEANT TO DESTROY THE SHELTER, IT ONLY MADE IT STRONGER.

BY BETH HEALY

O

n its face, it looked like just another Boston fire, in a city on fire.

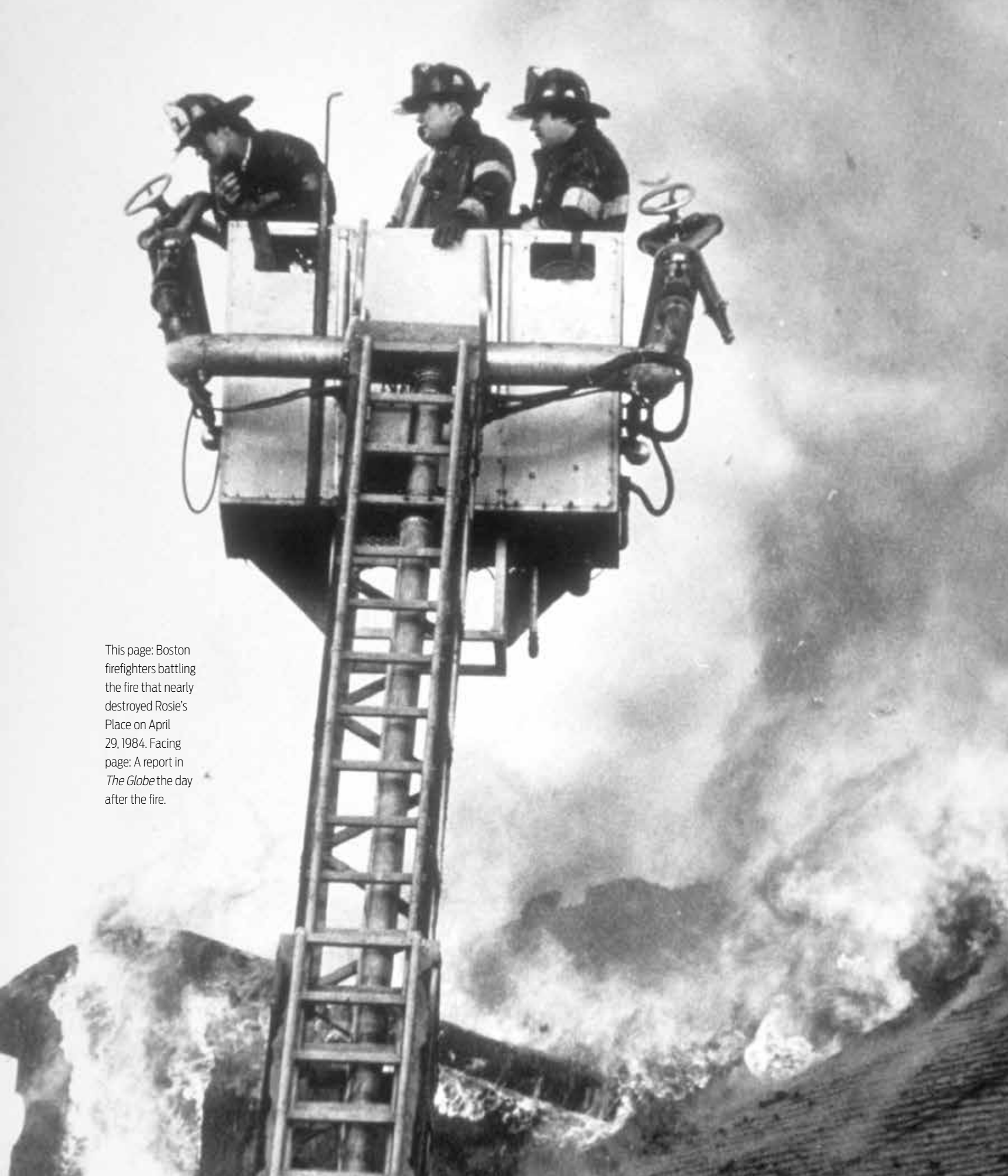
That afternoon in April 1984 was sunny, a cool 59 degrees. The two-alarm blaze tore through the upper floors of a five-story brownstone in the South End, flames and dark smoke billowing through the roof. Seven engines and four ladder trucks. The source of the fire: “Unknown,” as the Boston Fire Department’s official report would conclude. The cause: “Suspicious.”

There were hundreds of suspicious fires in Boston in the early ’80s, including some set by an infamous arson ring. Many others were linked to real estate developers gunning for insurance payouts and easy evictions. Most cases went unsolved. Arson-for-profit, they called it, yet another scourge on an ailing city.

The occupants of this particular building were high on nobody’s list. Some 50 women scattered out of the brick row house at 1662 Washington Street to escape



FIRE PHOTOGRAPH FROM ROSIE'S PLACE



This page: Boston firefighters battling the fire that nearly destroyed Rosie's Place on April 29, 1984. Facing page: A report in *The Globe* the day after the fire.

the smoke and flames. It was 4:30 p.m. on a Sunday, the busy hour around dinner at Rosie's Place, a shelter for homeless women. Rosie's had been struggling to get by on this block for seven years, in the rumbling shadows of the elevated train tracks and next door to neighbors betting on gentrification to bring back this once-upper-middle-class part of the city.

As far as the Rosie's volunteers could tell, everyone had made it out safely. But they needed to get word to Kip Tiernan.

There was no answer at her home phone, and no immediate way to reach her in those pre-cellphone days. She was probably on the Cape, for a weekend respite at her tiny cottage in Provincetown.

Only a week before the fire, Tiernan and the women of Rosie's had marked a 10th anniversary, celebrating the bittersweet success of an experiment Tiernan had launched on Easter Sunday 1974. She and a group of friends had started with a modest notion: to serve coffee and sandwiches to women with nowhere to go. They wound up creating the first homeless shelter for women in the country.

And now their building was drenched and smoldering, windows smashed, to the horror of the guests, and the quiet satisfaction of some of the neighbors.

A number of people had been less than thrilled when Rosie's Place first arrived on the block in 1977, taking over a vacant brownstone not far from Massachusetts Avenue.

In particular, some members of the Worcester Square Area Neighborhood Association, a group of South End residents, were vocal about the problems they felt a shelter would bring. "They didn't want them here in the beginning and it was very nasty. It's the worst meeting I've ever been to," says Alison Barnet, a writer and South End historian who was on the board of the association. "I think about it every time I walk past that building."

There were two factions on the group's board: longtimers with a tolerance for their changing neighborhood and its increasingly diverse residents, and a handful of more conservative members who worried about property values, and would fight virtually any effort at affordable or senior housing in the area.

Tiernan, who liked to dress in men's khakis and a cap, and wore a large cross and skate key on her leather necklace, was not shy about taking on adversity. And she was getting used to speaking up to bullies on behalf of homeless women. She bought the brownstone with an \$18,000 down payment donated by a woman doctor. After two temporary homes, Rosie's finally had a permanent one.

"We hope more and more places like Rosie's will open up, because the need grows moment by moment," Tiernan said at the time. It was a notion she would later change her mind about entirely, when, even as the number of shelters across the country surged into the thousands in the 1980s, poverty and homelessness only grew worse.

When they'd originally opened in 1974, Rosie's took over an abandoned grocery store space on Columbus Avenue called Rozen's, a short walk away. The word "homeless" wasn't even in the common parlance yet. The men who wandered the streets and slept on park benches, many of them Vietnam veterans, were called winos, vagrants, and worse. As for the women, "shopping bag ladies" was the most polite reference you'd hear. They were poor outcasts, seen as failures at motherhood, marriage, sobriety, or all three. Many suffered from mental illness.

"The women that Kip was initially dealing with, they were just invisible," says Randy Albelda, an economics professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston who studies family poverty.

Tiernan herself hadn't always known about this pocket of female suffering. She was a writer and jazz piano player, a middle-class striver who'd dreamed of Broadway but made a living writing ad copy for department stores and what was then called the New England Dairy Council. By the

late 1960s, after years of helping raise her partner's kids in the suburbs, she went to work in Roxbury with a group of urban priests, protesting the Vietnam War.

Tiernan was not religious in any traditional sense, and was as surprised as anyone to find kindred spirits in this crowd. Yet she was intrigued by their liberation theology: the idea that an economy rigged against the poor was wrong, even sinful—and that fighting social inequity and oppression was their duty.

Then in July 1973, an alternative weekly newspaper in Boston called *The Real Paper* offered this for a lead headline: "Women Derelicts: To Be Old, Homeless and Drunk."

The story said there were as many as 1,000 poor women living on the streets of Boston. The tales were disturbing. Ordinary women with names like Mary, Ann, and Masha, living in squalor in abandoned buildings; too sick from drinking to work; selling sexual favors for \$1 in bars and alleys. And always looking for a place to sleep.

One doctor quoted by reporter Anita Harris was skeptical there was a problem at all. "You must have been talking to the women's libbers," he told Harris. Yet it turned out the city's welfare department had quietly started a homeless women's division.

This story gripped Tiernan and wouldn't let go. It shined a light on a strange truth in the upheaval of the early 1970s: Women were unequal to men even in poverty.

In Boston, homeless men could find a bed at the Salvation Army or the Pine Street Inn. For women, there was no place. Some dressed as men to get into Pine Street, says Lyndia Downie, now the shelter's president. Also, "if they had to stay out, they wanted to stay safe." On cold nights, Pine Street would let a few women sleep in the lobby, behind a sheet. (Pine



Street has a women's shelter today.)

Tiernan dove into research mode, talking to everyone she could. She visited soup kitchens and shelters in New York, Baltimore, and Chicago, and always found women at the back of the line, she said.

She typed dozens of letters, appealing to local officials in Boston for help. She'd walk by boarded-up storefronts, graffitied facades, and gritty neighborhoods emptied out in "white flight" to the suburbs, and wonder why it was so hard to find a space for a good cause.

Finally, she persuaded a local office of the Boston Redevelopment Authority to help. Officials there agreed to rent her the abandoned storefront grocery for a dollar in 1974. The city would haul away debris from the store, but the rest was up to Tiernan and her recruits. They scrubbed floors, painted the walls yellow, and hung cheerful posters, thanks to \$250 donated by two women in the suburbs.

When they opened on that first Easter, Tiernan and her friends plugged in a pot of coffee, made stacks of bologna sandwiches, and put flowers on the tables. Then they waited, like anxious hosts. Nobody came except one woman and her black dog.

Eventually, they did come. Word spread. Rosie's wasn't fancy by any stretch. There were heaps of donated clothes stacked in old meat refrigerators, and the air was thick with cockroach killer and cigarette smoke. But it was a place to sit and take a rest from the street. Sip coffee and have something to eat.

As the hours expanded, Tiernan tried to cling to Saturdays off, some

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shred of normalcy. When a couple of young volunteers started pushing to offer overnight shelter to guests, Tiernan resisted. Not only was that illegal in their makeshift space, she pointed out, but she wasn't looking to spend all her nights there. Who would staff it?

But within a year, she relented. Sending the women out into the night was painful. So they tucked 10 cots in the back of the store, and took turns staying there with the guests. It was hardly restful—persuading this one to stop crinkling her bags, and that one to stop talking. Keeping an eye on the men passing by outside, sometimes drunk or fighting in the middle of the night.

Many of the women would quickly become regulars. There was Natasha, a large Russian woman who leaned heavily on her shopping cart and often asked if they'd be serving borscht that day. There was Cookie, with a deep fear of fire since childhood. Mary longed to return to Canada and her Mi'kmaq people. Pat, a brilliant woman and an alcoholic, would recite poetry by memory that she'd learned as a schoolgirl. One lady thought she was the Vir-

gin Mary.

And there was Alice. One day she showed up, on the arms of a couple of guys who'd found her wandering the South End, talking to herself. Drunk and obstreperous, she came in demanding cigarettes, coffee, and spare change. She headed for the ladies' room, only to be found soon after, sitting in the sink, water gushing to the floor. She was washing her pants, she said.

Alice, diagnosed with schizophrenia, had been in a state psychiatric hospital for decades, then was released due to budget cuts, like so many in those days. Tiernan would bring her along to meetings, buy her cigarettes, and bail her out of jail at least once. She'd get her Nancy Drew books from the library, take her to doctors' appointments, and help her find an apartment.

There were frustrations, to be sure. Alice was known to stuff leftover mashed potatoes in her pockets at the diner, and panhandle in the Combat Zone, even after Tiernan gave her cash for cigarettes and taxis. Sometimes she'd sleep at the dirty movies.

Tiernan, who died in 2011 at age 85, had an almost bottomless well of empathy for her guests, even the "cuckoos," as she fondly and politically incorrectly called them. At times it seemed the more challenging their mental illness or behavioral issue, the more she was drawn to them.

"Kippy would just fall in love with somebody like Alice," says Kathe McKenna, who with her husband ran Haley House, a men's shelter in the South End, and helped start Rosie's. "The more outrageous somebody was, the more enticing they were for Kip."

Tiernan acknowledged as much. In one of many interviews for this story before she died, she said, "For some reason or other, I felt wanted by this group."

Kip Tiernan knew what darkness looked like. She was orphaned at age 11, when her mother died just before Christmas. Tiernan's father, a World War I veteran, had died when she was a baby. After that, she was raised by her grandmother, a stern but generous Irish immigrant who'd invite poor men in to dinner during the Depression.

Tiernan tangled with the nuns at her high school in Connecticut and never graduated. She wrote for a local paper, spent time at jazz clubs, and blew a chance at the Boston Conservatory, she later said, because she was drinking.

By her early 20s, she was "a poster girl for AA," she recalled, the only woman at the meetings in a church basement on Newbury Street. Somehow Tiernan knew there were things she wanted to accomplish in this



Kip Tiernan, founder of Rosie's Place, photographed in 2008 at the shelter's current home on Harrison Avenue.



Above, from left: Alison Barnet will never forget the vitriol that accompanied the arrival of Rosie's Place; Tiernan embracing one of her first guests at the 25th anniversary of the shelter in 1999.



At left: Diane Adjete serves food to guests in 2000.



At left: In 2013, overnight program manager Deborah Conway gathers clothing for a new guest at the shelter. Above: Construction of a new and expanded home for Rosie's Place in 1999.

world. “And they weren’t going to happen under the table,” she said.

That was a half a lifetime ago. By the time she started Rosie’s she was 48, restless and ambitious. Over the years, she would help start the Greater Boston Food Bank, after first hauling food in her station wagon; the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program; the Poor People’s United Fund; and other nonprofits.

By 1984, Rosie’s was providing dinner for hundreds of women a week on Washington Street, and offering beds to a dozen at a time. They had to turn women away every night. There was never enough room for the growing numbers of homeless women.

This made Tiernan furious. She never imagined the problem she’d set out to tackle all those years ago would only become worse with time. The economy wouldn’t adapt, and the politicians and the powerful wouldn’t take action to address poverty at its source.

In fact, the creation of Rosie’s hadn’t fixed anything. It provided necessities, emergency help, a Band-Aid, Tiernan often said. But not a solution.

“I come to speak not of charity but justice,” Tiernan testified at a State House committee hearing in 1983. “Addressing the pathology of homelessness is not a simple matter of providing three hots and a cot in a gym somewhere.”

Homelessness was the result of poverty, she told them, offering a prescient warning: “A shelter system is not an answer. It will become, later on down the line, part of the problem itself.”

There were roughly 300,000 homeless people in the United States in 1983. As of 2019 there were 568,000, with nearly one-third of those families with children (many more are at risk now due to the recession and a likely wave of evictions). Massachusetts has the sixth-highest number of homeless people in the country, at more than 18,000; California tops the list, exceeding 151,000.

There were two Bostons as far as Tiernan was concerned—one that celebrated the 1976 unveiling of a shiny Quincy Market makeover that was a triumph for Mayor Kevin White, and one where old ladies were being evicted from single-room apartments to make way for condominium developers.

And in those nascent days of an economy that would eventually be called the “Massachusetts miracle”—a boom that would do little for the poor—there was this underbelly, where fires burned almost nightly. Boston was under siege, sometimes with more than 50,000 fire calls a year. Malicious false alarms were rampant, and there were hundreds of fires, ravaging predominately Black and Latino neighborhoods. Veteran firefighters called these “the war years” and Boston was dubbed the arson capital of the world.

St. Philip’s Church burned down, a place of nostalgia for Tiernan because it’s where she’d met her priest friends. Then one of her guests died in a fire—Cookie, found in an abandoned building. Tiernan was heartbroken.

And now Rosie’s Place itself had burned. The day after the fire, volunteers ran up and down the stairs, carrying out any supplies they could salvage. Oddly, Tiernan would find a note stuffed in the brass mail slot. It was on a brown paper towel, written in ballpoint pen:

*Each Night from December to December
Before you drift to sleep upon your cot
Think back on all the tales that you remember
Of Camelot.*

Tiernan didn’t know what to make of it.

Fire officials came and the arson squad was investigating amid the ashes. The fire had started on the fourth floor, erupting in a “ball of fire,” by one eyewitness account. It could have been a cigarette dropped by a guest, Tiernan supposed, or an electrical malfunction. But investigators found no evidence of either.

As bleak as she felt, Tiernan told reporters that Rosie’s would rebuild. Boston Mayor Ray Flynn showed up at the scene the next day, pledging

help, as did Governor Michael Dukakis.

An Orange Line train passing by on the elevated tracks stopped above the Rosie’s workers and onlookers. The conductor sounded the horn, gave a thumbs up, and riders hollered their support for Rosie’s.

This public outpouring was both welcome and surprising. But the cause of the fire remained a mystery. Rosie’s had enemies, and many in the neighborhood suspected foul play. There was easy access to its upper floors by the fire escapes. One neighbor learned that an adjacent property owner had increased their home insurance just before the blaze. Barnet, the Worcester Square neighborhood historian, wrote in an opinion piece, “The fire was set (by whom we don’t know).”

At a tense neighborhood meeting where Tiernan and Rosie’s manager Sue Costa were pressured to move the shelter, Costa shot back, “We were at least as scared by the fire as you. It was a set fire. The issue was not negligence,” according to the minutes. There is no record of anyone arguing the point.

Within weeks of the fire, members of the Worcester Square neighborhood association ratcheted up the pressure. Funeral parlor owner Arthur Hasiotis, no fan of Rosie’s guests loitering on his stoop, wrote a summary of the dangers he said the shelter posed to the neighborhood.

He accused Rosie’s guests of “anti-social acts,” deranged yelling and swearing in the street at night. Sometimes they’d bring food or drink outside, he wrote, leaving an unsightly mess. “Certainly, rats and filth are the last thing we need more of.”

A new association president, Fernando Requena, testified at a city hearing against the shelter rebuilding (he did not return requests for comment). And according to board meeting records, the Rev. Francis Gilday, a Jesuit priest, cited health concerns, saying, “One big epidemic or contagion is all it takes. They have no doctor in that place.”

There was no such epidemic. But now, as Boston and the nation lie gripped in a pandemic, the city’s poor and homeless are being especially hard-hit. Of 2,300 homeless people tested in the city between March and May, one-third were infected with the coronavirus, although many did not show symptoms.

Leemarie Mosca, Rosie’s current executive director, says Tiernan’s words and warnings ring truer than ever as shelters grapple with the virus. “It does feel as if there is no end in sight,” Mosca says. “If you don’t change our worldview about housing, and what folks should be entitled to as a basic human right, then I don’t see how we’re ever going to stop the spread.”

Tiernan would barely recognize this bizarre time of social distancing and face masks. Her model of caring for homeless people included warm hugs, an arm on a shoulder, a side-by-side chat. And something even rarer: love without judgment.

Rosie’s did rebuild after the fire, and doubled down on its mission. It turned the refurbished brownstone into housing for formerly homeless women and expanded to its current building on Harrison Avenue, on the grounds of old St. Philip’s. Hundreds of thousands of dollars poured in, mostly from small donors and also nonprofits. Tiernan insisted they wouldn’t take government money.

After the unsolved fire, Tiernan—a master of public relations, even while fierce in her mission—never publicly called out her neighbors. Instead, she praised them, calling them gracious for supporting the rebuilding effort.

As the years went by, Tiernan rarely spoke of the fire. But in a personal letter that’s part of her archival material, she confided, “We were, in the lexicon of the ‘hood, torched.” ■

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