

By Danielle Ray

On November 8, 2012, single mother Bernadine Gates was attending class at Cape Cod Community College (CCCC) when she received a phone call from a good friend and neighbor who had some jarring news – the apartment she was living in had burned to the ground.

“I was in disbelief, shocked, almost numb,” Bernadine recalls. “I was shaking the whole drive home.”

Bernadine broke the news to her two daughters, Cassidy, 9, and Corynn, 7, when they got out of school that afternoon; both girls started crying immediately because not only had they lost all of their possessions but also their beloved rabbit, Mr. Snickers. All any of them had were the clothes on their backs that they were wearing that day.

“The fire affected us in many ways; you're never really prepared for something this awful to happen to your family, so when it does it hits pretty hard,” Bernadine said. “We are all going to be recovering from the loss of our home and everything in it for some time now, but we can't dwell - we need to stay focused and move on, start over and stay positive.”

After her family moved to Cape Cod from Walpole in 1994, Bernadine graduated from Bourne High School in 1998; she is now a full-time student at CCCC pursuing an Associate's Degree in Liberal Arts. She plans on continuing her education by transferring next fall to go for a degree in psychology with the hopes of one day working as a social worker in a school system, and maybe having her own family practice down the road.

Bernadine works two waitressing jobs – one at Baccari's diner in North Falmouth on the weekends, and also at Quahog Republic in Onset seasonally. Although she says it is often “hard” to make ends meet, she does what she can for her daughters.

“I'm doing the best I can and my girls are happy,” Bernadine said proudly. “That's all that matters.”

Both restaurants hosted fundraisers for Bernadine and her girls in the wake of the fire, and her sister Keli Gates organized a spaghetti dinner fundraiser at the VFW in Bourne.

“Keli has been an amazing sister through all this,” Bernadine said. “She has been very active in helping collect and store donations for me. I am not sure how I would have made out without her help.”

Since the fire they have been staying at Bernadine's boyfriend's family house in West Wareham, but they are searching for a permanent place to live, hopefully still in Bourne.

“They have been very welcoming and generous,” Bernadine said of her hosts.

Bernadine's stepmother, Paula Gates, put her in touch with the Greg Hill Foundation. After raising money on his morning show, Greg mailed Bernadine a check for \$9,460.

“[The donation] means a fresh start, opportunities, and being able to afford first, last and security when we find a place,” Bernadine said. “Without all those donations we wouldn't even be able to look for a new home.”

Bernadine said she has been overwhelmed by the “heartwarming, generous people” who have stepped up to help her and her girls – starting even on the night of the fire when the Red Cross showed up.

“My kids never were a minute needing anything,” she said, adding that friends and family immediately went out and purchased new clothes for her and her daughters.

“That’s how amazing these people are. I don't think anyone could truly know how thankful I am for all the help and donations given to my family.”

The substantial donation from the Greg Hill Foundation is particularly meaningful to Bernadine, Cassidy and Corynn, because Bernadine said the Foundation has a way of bringing the community together to help their neighbors in need.

“The Greg Hill Foundation is so important because they can help families that might not have opportunity to help themselves,” Bernadine said. “They are an amazing foundation and I am forever grateful.”

Although the girls are adjusting ok in the wake of the fire, which was caused by a faulty furnace, they have struggled with the loss of their pet – and with the daily fear of another fire.

“The first couple days they were worried that wherever they were staying might burn down,” Bernadine said. “Every morning they would gather all the toys and stuffed animals that they had and take them to school with them. I think that fear will always be with them. I keep telling them they shouldn't worry; something that bad won't happen to us again.”