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Seven months after a devastating house fire, junior Taylor Migliazzo returns to a reconstructed house

story by **MEGAN SCHAFF**
managing editor of print

The morning of April 24 began as any other Saturday in the Migliazzo household. The night before, Paul and Shelly Migliazzo told their daughters, junior Taylor and her 8th grade sister Olivia, that they were going to weekly brunch at their grandparents' house. They were going whether they liked it or not. April 24, the girls begrudgingly got out of bed bright and early. Taylor brushed her teeth, fixed her hair, pulled on black yoga pants and a University of Oklahoma sweatshirt and at 10 a.m. the four of them backed their blue Ford Explorer onto 68th Terrace. This was their Saturday morning routine.

However, this Saturday was not like any other.

They pulled up to their grandparents' familiar house near St. Thomas More parish, expecting a few hours of great food and a little family bonding. Little did they know, this would be their home for the next seven months.

About 30 minutes into eggs, bacon, orange juice and laughter, Olivia heard the "buzz, buzz, buzz" of her AT&T Mythic phone vibrating on the table. She answered the call only to hear her friend and neighbor Lilly O'Neill shout in panic, "Your house is on fire!" The six of them looked at each other around the table with confused looks, not knowing whether to run out the door or laugh at a simple prank.

"At first we thought it was a joke," Paul said. "It's a seventh grader calling another seventh grader. You figure they're being silly. But that's not something you normally joke about. So we told Olivia to call her back just to make sure."

Lilly wasn't joking.

The four jumped out of their chairs and raced out the door, their minds torn between reasonable thought and sheer panic. Taylor expected a small fire; she thought the back of the house might be slightly burned or an old chair would be scorched. She was looking forward to walking up the stairs to her sea-



melt my heart ★ The TV in the Migliazzo's family room was melted during the fire April 24. A picture nearby remained undamaged. Photo **SUBMITTED**

foam green room and finding everything the way she left it—her volleyball trophies from national tournaments on the shelf where they always are or her 16 years worth of picture collages hanging on the wall.

What they found was nowhere close to their expectations.

Burning away

They pulled up to find a crowd of concerned neighbors and friends speechlessly watching flames engulf their home, multiple flashing fire trucks parked on normally quaint 68th Terrace, firemen hosing down their bedrooms through second story windows and a heavy gray cloud of smoke hovering in the sky.

On the outside was the same red brick, white stucco, green-trimmed house they had seen an hour ago. It was the same house Taylor and Olivia had grown up in. It was the same house they had played American girl dolls in, baked chocolate chip cookies in, colored family portraits in and ate nightly family dinners in.

It was the same house on the outside, but on the inside, they only saw black—black walls, black

ceilings, black furniture and black light fixtures. The wallpaper was bubbling so badly that it was falling off the walls, unrecognizable to the people who had seen it every day for over 16 years. The TVs were melting, the plastic falling like wax from lighted candles. Mirrors were smoky and fogged. A gaping hole had been formed in the dining room floor. The family stood in shock—the only emotion they could feel.

"It's surreal," Paul said. "You see all this activity—firemen busting up your floor, belongings being tossed out windows—and it's unbelievable. You see it on the news and you know it happens, but it doesn't happen to you. You feel helpless. An hour ago, everything was normal, and now, everything is upside down."

Fire investigators determined the fire was an electrical fire, caused by a canned light in the basement that sparked—even though it was turned off. Although the fire took only six or seven minutes to spread throughout the entire house, the destruction it caused was monumental.

"I never thought it would happen to me until it did," Taylor said. "I kept thinking back to all the stuff



torn apart ★ The Migliazzos completely gutted their house during construction after a fire rendered the structure unstable. Photo **SUBMITTED**

they teach you in grade school, like if a fire happens stop drop and roll. I never thought I had to listen to that but then this happened. You have to know what to do."

The Migliazzos left their house about 30 minutes before the fire started. Although most of their material possessions were destroyed by the flames, smoke or water from the firemen's hoses, there were no people or pets left inside the house. In the words of Taylor, they simply "got lucky."

"Right from the start, the fact that we were all together and we didn't have to worry about anyone's safety made [the fire] just about stuff," Paul said. "It's just stuff. It's replaceable. Knowing no one was in harm's way was a burden we didn't have to deal with. The furniture we sat on every day was destroyed, but a lot of the pictures and memorabilia from the kids' childhoods were saved since they were in the attic. We still have lifelong memories."

Family matters

Without anywhere to turn, the family ended the day where they had started it: at Paul's parents'



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“It was really emotional because it wasn't just Taylor who was affected. Her whole family was crying. It was scary to think about how one of them could have been there and gotten hurt.”
Kathleen Vogel, junior

“That day we really just tried to keep things normal, we didn't want her to be alone. The best thing we could do was just be there for her as a friend and help her in any little way, like borrowing clothes or spending the night.”
Katie Patterson, junior

“You don't think it'll ever happen to you. When it happens to someone you know, it's really eye opening.”
Peter O'Neill, neighbor

“I went right over, and as soon as the house was in sight and I saw how bad it was I burst into tears. It's sad to think about how much they lost. Not just material things, but also sentimental things. I couldn't do a lot for her, but I just stayed with her and tried to console her as much as possible.”
Meka Kelly, junior

“I got out of my lacrosse game and had a million missed messages saying to go to Taylor's house. I got there right as they got the fire under control. My mouth dropped. I couldn't believe that somewhere I had been three days ago was just gone. All I could offer Taylor was my support and my closet.”
Margot Livers, junior



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1. Junior Taylor Migliazzo moves back into her Dec. 7 after a fire damaged the entire inside last Spring. 2. Migliazzo opens a box with belongings for her new room Dec. 7. 3. Shelly Migliazzo, Taylor's mother, glances around her newly renovated kitchen since the fire destroyed it April 24. Photos by **TAYLOR WOODRUFF**



matter of time ★ Starting in the basement, the fire burned a hole in the floor of the living room and melted the walls. Photo **SUBMITTED**



black out ★ After knocking out windows to extinguish the fire April 24, windows were boarded up with blocks of wood. Photo **SUBMITTED**

house. The five-bedroom house that they usually visited a few times a month became their home. No one had their own clothes or their own bed. Taylor and Olivia had to share a closet. No one could rely on Shelly's comforting sauerbraten pasta. They weren't near their neighborhood support system; they were in unfamiliar territory. Regardless, her grandparents, Vince and Bernice, took the family in without question, making their son and his family feel at home to the best of their abilities.

“[My grandparents] are perfect,” Taylor said. “They automatically took us in and didn't even have to think about it. They were always making us food and making sure we were okay after everything happened. They were so supportive throughout this whole process.”

New beginnings

After a few weeks of accepting what had happened, adjusting to life in a new environment and planning the future, Paul and Shelly began rebuilding the house. They searched for contractors, painters, electricians, plumbers and carpenters to build their

house literally from the ground up. The construction crew completely tore the inside apart, leaving nothing but the studs behind.

The Migliazzos bought new furniture. They changed the floor plan. They added closets here and there. In building their house, they built their future. After seven months of electrical wires sparking, drywall dust covering the floors, the smell of paint fumes seeping into every nook and cranny and the noise of power tools vibrating constantly, the house was finished.

On November 16 they packed up dozens of cardboard boxes, drove their explorer back to Brookside and walked through the door of their new house. This day was not only moving day, it was Taylor's 17 birthday. While moving back in was a blessing for each of the Migliazzos, to Taylor, simply eating her signature pink champagne cake—complete with pink icing, sparkles and a bottle of champagne mixed into vanilla batter—and blowing out candles in her own home was the best present she could have asked for.

“Sleeping in my bed the first night was so comfort-

able,” Taylor said. “It was the by far the best sleep I've gotten in the past seven months. Waking up was weird because I was like ‘wait, I'm actually in my room.’ It was a great birthday present.”

The walls may be new, but the family is just the same. Shelly still puts glass bowls of Hershey's Kisses around the house during the holidays. Antique tables and ancient decorations still elaborately furnish the living room. Family pictures still line the shelves.

“You move on,” Paul said. “We're right back where we were seven months ago. It feels like the exact same house.”

The Migliazzos can now put on their plaid skirts and suits in the morning, watch TV in their new hangout spot in the attic and eat family dinners around the glass dining room table. They now have a house complete with hardwood floors, brand new appliances, fresh coats of paint, new bedspreads and pillows, chandeliers hanging from the ceilings, tiled bathrooms and plasma screen TVs. To Taylor, it even smells new. But they also have a home—one that feels the same as it has for 17 years. ★ contact Megan Schaff at mschaff@dartnewsonline.com



By the numbers

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The number of minutes it took the fire to destroy the entire inside of the Migliazzo's house



Taylor's address on West 68th Terrace

605

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The number of months the Migliazzos lived with their grandparents while they renovated their old house.



Check out the pictures and video about the Migliazzo family house fire on DartNewsOnline.