

Victims still waiting as WorkSafe investigation continues

## Explosion house gets demolished



Nearly 18 months after he suffered critical injuries escaping from his flaming home. Ben D'Ath looked on as its charred remains were finally demolished yesterday.

Although D'Ath got out of the New Plymouth inferno, 28 per cent of his body was burnt, and he was in an induced coma for 10 days at Waikato Hospital.

But while his former cottage is no more, D'Ath, and others affected by the December 29, 2020, gas explosion are still struggling and waiting for answers.

"It's been tough the last few months," D'Ath said.

WorkSafe has been investigating the blaze, which a fire investigator found was caused by a small split in a PowerCo gas main. Yesterday, a spokesperson said its investigation, which will determine if there will be prosecution or compensation, was

As he stood on Devon St West watching a digger pulling down the 120-year-old cottage, D'Ath said it was "just one more step" towards closure.

But the real closure will come for him when his surgeries are complete. He is waiting to hear when the skin grafts on his back can be redone.

"I'm pretty much back to square one, really," he said. "My back's been super painful."

This had been the first summer when he had not been allowed in the sun, and had missed out on a lot of social events as a result.

"All of my friends went to

Synthony, but I can't be in that situation," D'Ath said. "Even financially it's been super stressful."

He has not been able to go back to work full-time as a photographer and videographer, but has spent "tens of thousands of dollars" on medical treatments.

D'Ath is now waiting on the investigation to be complete, but is not convinced that will happen anytime soon as WorkSafe recently told him they would give monthly updates, he said.

"Ideally" he'd like to get back the money he has spent on his recovery.

PowerCo, which owned the pipe that leaked and led to the explosion, had kept in contact with him, which he said had been "really good".

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Carol Thompson, and husband Lewis Roach, own the home and a neighbouring property. She said she had received little to no word from either WorkSafe or PowerCo and was still out of pocket.



D'Ath and girlfriend Leticia Nixon, who was also in the building at the time of the fire, look on as the place they had called home is demolished.

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"There's nothing they can do until WorkSafe do their part."

D'Ath watched the demolition with girlfriend Leticia Nixon, who also escaped the fire, at his side.

Not long after the explosion, Nixon and downstairs neighbour Kerry Roach spoke to *The Taranaki Daily News* about the horror, from which they had both walked away relatively unscathed.

Also watching on as the cottage and its neighbouring property were demolished was Roach's stepmother Carol Thompson, who owns them with her husband Lewis Roach.

Thompson was critical of both

WorkSafe and PowerCo, saying she'd had little to no word from either.

"They've basically left us hanging," Thompson said. "How long does it take? There are no excuses."

A for sale sign had sat on the properties' fence for months, with Thompson hoping to recover the money they lost the minute the house went up in flames.

"But it was in the 'too hard' basket for a lot of people," she said. "We've been forced into demolishing them, and at our cost."

While she would not discuss how much money she and her husband had been forced to pay out, and they were "not on the bones of their arses", they did not have contents insurance and had lost out on rent, and while they had received an insurance payout, Thompson did not think it was enough.

"There's a price difference obviously," she said. "This was my retirement."

She also knew D'Ath, which is why she rented the home to him, and had felt for him every step of his recovery.

"There's still no closure, we need closure," Thompson said.

"Everything's been on hold since the house blew up. We just want it to be over."