**Blooming from the ashes**

By: Lindsay Friedman

On the morning of Sunday, Nov. 16, flower shop owners, Davey and Natasha Neal expected an easy day with one delivery to a funeral service later on. Enjoying the first snow of the season from their windows, the family stayed in their beds later than usual.

The rare opportunity didn’t last long, however, after a 6 a.m. phone call from their 10-year-old son Levi’s football coach, Heath Bennett.

Unable to hear the entire conversation, Natasha watched her husband’s face contort itself into a look of disbelief.

“There’s been a fire,” he told her while jumping out of bed.

It wasn’t long until the Neals would all but forgot about the flurries as they watched them disappear into a cloud of black smoke.

Their shop, Jack Neal Floral, and everything in it — along with the new holiday decorations they put up just last night — no longer existed.

“We had no idea,” Natasha Neal said. “I never got any calls from the people you would expect to get a call from when your business is on fire.”

As her husband of 12 years sped down to Union Street, Natasha stayed with their three children. She had nothing to do but wait. The phone, she said, had become her enemy.

Information slowly trickled in. Their 30-year-old shop and four others on Union Street — Jackie O’s, The Union, Kismet and Smoke Zone — had caught on fire around 3 a.m.

Athens Fire Chief Robert Rymer said it was the most devastating Uptown fire the department had seen in years. Despite being short staffed, underfunded and without their only engine ladder, which was recalled after only a year in service, Rymer couldn’t think of much his guys could have done any differently.

“It went rather well, all things considered,” he said. “Hopefully, we won’t have to do it again.”

Though inspectors have yet to declare what caused the fire, it was determined that it started in the back of Kismet. It’s expected that the Neals, and other business owners affected by the fire, won’t have much to salvage from the debris.

Having been on the job for 24 years, firefighter Paul Schultz knew the fire was a big one when he received the all-call page from the department chief.

“That doesn’t happen often,” Schultz said.

Still, he didn’t expect to see the largest fire of his career, or even the last two decades. But that’s what Schultz found when he and his fire crew pulled up to Union Street. Departments from neighboring areas such as Nelsonville, The Plains and Richland were called. Ohio University and Athens police departments were already there or on their way.

Closest to the fire when reported, officers from Athens Police Department were the first on the scene. Though they’re not trained to deal with situations involving fire, they made an exception. First, they needed to get everyone inside and on the roofs to safety. Then, they would secure the area.

“I’m proud of my officers for assisting the way they did,” said Athens Police Capitan Ralph Harvey, who was out of town during the fire.“It’s my understanding they saved a few lives.”

Though no one was seriously injured, it took almost two days to dowse the fire and surrounding hot spots. Units were on the scene for almost an entire week. Schultz, for example, was there from early morning Sunday until Tuesday afternoon.

“I thought we were going to lose the whole block,” he said. “There was one point I looked over to where Bromley should’ve been but I couldn’t see anything. It was just this huge cloud of black smoke.”

It wouldn’t have been the first time a block in Uptown Athens burned and took a flower shop down with it. Old reports of Uptown fires in *The Post, Athens News, Messenger* and *The Early Years of Ohio University* go back to as early as 1818, and in almost every Uptown or Court Street fire involving multiple buildings, a local flower store was involved.

The Athens Flower Shop, which was in business until the past year, has had the worst luck. The family-owned store burned down three times in a span of about 20 years.

The first time was in a 1962 fire, affecting only the flower shop. In 1984, six buildings on Court Street, including Athens Flower shop, were destroyed, causing an estimated $1.5 million in damage. It marked the largest monetary loss caused by a fire in Athens County to date.

The same buildings had burned down years before in 1877,destroying almost all of the buildings on East Union Street and North Court Street. In each case, the majority of business owners were typically forced to either rebuild or relocate. For example, Athens Flower Shop moved from its Court Street location to their last spot on East State Street.

In most instances, the cause of the multiple fires remained undetermined, but firefighters and inspectors said they could have been less severe if building owners were more conscious of fire codes when renovating, securing roofs with fencing, and installing alarm or sprinkler systems, which weren’t required by city code at the time.

Without enough personnel on staff and no official inspector at the firehouse, Rymer said, the department does its best to check local businesses for fire code compliance and safety and follow-up. But sometimes, they just don’t have the resources.

In the most recent fire, Rymer said these factors were still problematic. Because of fencing, one of which was razor wire, students and police officers were stuck on the roof. When fighting the flames, firefighters tripped over cords on the roof, as well. Though firefighters remember hearing alarms sounding in some of the buildings by the time they arrived, students like Ohio University senior Alison Stewart don’t recall the alarms’ buzzing. Instead, she was warned in an urgent phone call from a friend outside of her apartment as her 22nd birthday shuffle came to an end.

“I was in shock,” Stewart said. “I haven’t even seen the apartment yet but we were told it’s pretty likely we lost everything.”

The Neal family hoped they wouldn’t face the same fate. But as they approached the large plume of smoke, what little hope they had left slowly slipped away. By the time they were able to briefly enter the shop after the fire, the reality of the situation was heartbreaking.

The shop’s warm green floors and colorful displays were now a dull gray. Because of water damage, ceiling tiles had fallen to the floor, smashing arrangements and shelving units. The front window display, which once featured pink and white cursive letters spelling out the shop’s name, turned heads for a different reason, now hidden behind a large amount of black soot sticking to the glass.

“When we walked in I just basically fell apart,” Natasha said. “It was complete devastation from the moment we opened the front door. It was not only not good, it was horrible.”

The store’s entire database and records were lost, including its customer catalogue with previous orders; some yet to be paid for. Having grown up in Jack Neal Floral with his father, mother, Deana, and brother, Scotty Davey watched as most of its merchandise and priceless valuable family memories and photos were destroyed — save for a portrait of Davey’s father, Jack, the store’s founder.

Branching off from a separate greenhouse business on Union Street, Davey’s parents founded Jack Neal Floral in 1976. Davey grew up working in the shop, spending his time after school and during the weekends helping his parents. Deana sold the shop to Davey and Natasha a few years after Jack died in December 2001.

“Losing it all, especially from the sentimental point of view, is the hardest thing for us,” Natasha said. “It feels like something’s missing.”

Continuing with the same nostalgic *family values* the store was built on, the Neals have raised their three children (ranging in ages 1 to 14) in the shop. They helped during the holiday seasons just as their father had done. The holidays, however, are going to be a bit different for the Neal family this year.

Instead of centerpieces, poinsettias and Santa Claus, like in years past, the Neal family will focus on finding a place to relocate — a challenge previous flower shop owners in Athens could probably relate to.

“We can’t afford to wait,” Natasha said. “We have no choice.”

Because of a lack in insurance money, the Neals are unable to afford to restore the old shop as investigators work to determine the cause and assess damage from the fire. As their only source of income supporting the family, they need to get back to business as soon as possible.

The most frustrating thing, Natasha said, is that they had just redone part of the store with new shelving and started their holiday decorating, which featured a new window display.

“I was really proud to walk in and see how nice and clean it was,” Natasha said. “That’s obviously not the case now.”

Understanding the amount of devastation caused by the fire, locals have started fundraisers online as well as benefits at other local bars to help affected businesses. Ohio University also reached into their emergency relief fund and started a donation drive to help students get back on their feet.

Appreciative of the help, the Neals were a bit discouraged to find out the fundraisers would only help employees. With only one employee at the shop outside of the family, they knew it was important, but without a business to return to, the money would run out sooner or later.

Still, the family will figure it out, Natasha said. “We’ll find a way to move on.”

The Neals have found support in their customer base, too. Some customers have even reached out to help or sent in checks for services they haven’t yet paid for.

A few customers, like Jeananne Bricker, have known the Neals since Davey was in diapers. Though she no longer lives in Athens after moving to California with her husband, they remain loyal to Jack Neal Floral.

The couple still order from the store whenever they need to send something to family still in Athens. For example, Bricker said, Davey always delivers Mother's Day baskets for her and her husband’s moms. He knows her widowed mother isn't physically able to lift the flower basket to hang in the breezeway, so he always climbs up on a stepladder and does it for her.

“The Neal family always goes the extra step,” she said. “They are the true definition of a ‘mom and pop’ business that truly cares for their customers. It's not often that you can rely on a business for so many years to do the right thing every time, but they do.”

Athens local Brenda Ruth has memories of her mother frequenting the flower shop when growing up. The store is a “small town perk,” she said.

The Neals are well aware of and value the long lasting relationships they’ve had with customers. For Natasha, customer interaction was her favorite part of the job, which is another reason why the family is working hard to find a new place.

“We’re the ones who’re always there and will go the extra mile for you,” she said.

Though the family has to start from scratch, possibly at a much smaller location, they have no plans to let the business die anytime soon. They’re even considering a temporary fix — using the last Athens Flower Shop location on East State Street across the street from a dollar and video store.

For now, the business owners have started to take orders again while working out of the old Kenny Memorial building on 80 East State Street. On Dec. 10, they even received their first shipments of poinsettias.

No matter where Jack Neal Floral ends up, the portrait of Davey’s father will, of course, be coming with them.

“We will be back in business as soon as possible, bigger and better than we ever were before,” Natasha said. “Just stick with us. Jack Neal Floral will survive.”