TTE WAS ONE OF THE COLDEST DAYS of an unusually nasty winter, even for L’Île Verte. A bracing northern wind blew all day out of the snowy Charlevoix Mountains. It tore across the frozen mouth of the St. Lawrence River, 25 kilometres wide at this point, and blasted the village of 1,400 nestled on the river’s south shore, six hours northeast of Montreal.

Fifteen years later, Jean-Cyrice Martel had lived in the Residence du Havre seniors home, gazing out at the colourfullow of ice fishing boats that stood on the frozen river. They were used to harsh weather. Most had farmed the land and fished for smelt and herring all their lives. But even for such sturdy folk, this day—Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2014—was a little much. Most hadn’t ventured into the bitter weather and deep snows for days.

Jacqueline Dumont, 85, spent a relaxing day in the home with her husband, Louis-Cyrice Martel, 89, chatting and watching TV. Pretty much everyone over 80 was a childhood friend. They had gone to school together, watched each other have families and grow old. They were the human archives of a village steeped in history, going back to when Jacques Cartier first passed through the area in 1535 and noted the small lush green island just off the coast.

Cyrice had spent their lives tending a dairy farm. Theirs was an unusually small farmstead, its history tied to a cluster of houses built where the Résidence du Havre now stood.

Two years before, when his health deteriorated and he needed more care, he moved in to be by his husband’s side.

“I’m getting old,” he would sometimes tell her. “I’m ready to go. It’ll be better on the other side.”

But Jacqueline wasn’t ready to let her husband go. He gave her a kiss every morning and every night. They had celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary just two weeks before. That evening, after they kissed, Louis-Cyrice went to sleep in his room across the hall on the second floor. Sleeping apart was a downside of life in the home. A double room wasn’t available.

In her room, Jacqueline got into bed surrounded by family photos and keepsakes, including those of her own eight children, 14 grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

She was the oldest of six sisters and seven brothers. Her mother, Florence, was 91. Her father, Louis-Cyrice, wasn’t as lucky. His body was locked. He had never been locked before. She wanted to get to her husband, but the door wouldn’t open. She put on a coat and slippers, opened the patio door to the balcony and stepped into the bone-chilling cold and snow deep enough to cover her feet. That’s when she saw that the roof was on fire. Black smoke was billowing into the sky, and the air was full of red-hot embers.

Jacqueline saw firefighters on the ground below. “Help!” she screamed to get their attention. “Help!”

She wasn’t sure if they could hear amid the chaos and strong wind. She saw another resident on a third-floor balcony above. It was Colette Lafrance, 80, whom she had known since they were girls. Colette had gone onto the balcony after seeing thick smoke in the hall outside her room. Jacqueline saw her friend jump onto the roof of the second floor of the building. The snow there broke her fall. The two women started yelling together.

“Help!”

The smoke was getting thicker, and Jacqueline could barely see the firefighters below. No one was coming. The cold was becoming unbearable, and the embers were falling on her hair, singeing it. She brushed them off but burned her hands and coat sleeves. She considered jumping, but her balcony’s metre-high parapet was too high to climb over. Amid her fear, she couldn’t stop thinking about her husband.

She and Colette had screamed for at least five minutes before three firefighters came into view through the smoke just below.

“Jump!” they yelled to Colette. They had no ladder and wanted to try to catch her in their arms. She jumped without hesitation. The firefighters caught her and rushed her to an ambulance.

After that, a firefighter managed to find a ladder and prop it up against Jacqueline’s balcony. He scrambled up, hopped over the parapet and grabbed her in his arms, howling as, her over the barrier onto the ladder.

“Go down,” he said.

She was facing the wrong way, outward, but this was at no time to quibble. She climbed down the ladder a step at a time, her henna-soaked hair landing in her hair as she went. It took two minutes before she felt the ground under her feet. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t fallen. A waiting ambulance took her to the hospital in nearby Rivière-du-Loup to treat burns on her hands and legs.

Her husband, Louis-Cyrice, wasn’t as lucky. His body was later found on the first floor where it lay after the building collapsed in the hall. Colette Lafrance survived, too, but she also lost a loved one: her sister-in-law Madeleine Fraser, 86. They had been close friends since they were young women and were inseparable in the nursing home.

They were exhausted and haunted by the night. They had lost a home, but Perron was now head- ed to what he’d later say was the most terrible fire call of his career. He had had a professional life, serving as a Coast Guard officer and RCMP officer, then becoming a firefighter and earning a Queen’s Jubilee Medal. In all those years, Perron had never attended a major fire at a seniors home.

When Perron and Brazeau arrived in mid-afternoon, they came upon an astonishing scene. The Résidence du Havre, still smoldering as firefighters continued to fight the fire, had become a grotesque mausoleum of the home’s twisted remains—a mountain of solid ice, in places half a metre thick, from the water that firefighters had pumped, which had frozen almost instantly in the extreme cold. Entombed within the massive ice block were 76 bodies of an entire generation of the village’s elders, people whom the local volunteer firefighters had known since childhood.

They were exhausted and haunted by the night. They and the first police officers on the scene had risked their lives to save as many of the seniors as possible.

“Wake up,” he shouted. “There’s a fire in the hall. We have to save ourselves.”

He then went door to door, waking all three seniors—two in their 90s, the third, 85, all using walkers—down the emergency stairwell to the first floor and outside into the brutal cold. Côte was later nominated for a Governor General’s Award for Bravery.

The fire in L’Île Verte was on every channel.

“A lot of people will be dead,” Brazeau said. “It’s an absolute disaster.”

Brazeau asked if Perron was available to go straight away to L’Île Verte to help. Perron said yes, and the two men set off. It was the second major disaster they were dealing with in a small Quebec town in six months. The previous July, the two men had helped co-ordinate emergency workers in Quebec’s Eastern Townships region, where a 75-car freight train full of crude oil had derailed. The explosion and fires killed 47 and flattened half the downtown—Canada’s deadliest railway disaster in 146 years.

That had been a horror story, but Perron was now head- ed to what he’d later say was the most terrible fire call of his career. He had had a professional life, serving as a Coast Guard officer and RCMP officer, then becoming a firefighter and earning a Queen’s Jubilee Medal. In all those years, Perron had never at- tended a major fire at a seniors home.

When Perron and Brazeau arrived in mid-afternoon, they came upon an astonishing scene. The Résidence du Havre, still smoldering as firefighters continued to fight the fire, had become a grotesque mausoleum of the home’s twisted remains—–a mountain of solid ice, in places half a metre thick, from the water that firefighters had pumped, which had frozen almost instantly in the extreme cold. Entombed within the massive ice block were 76 bodies of an entire generation of the village’s elders, people whom the local volunteer firefighters had known since childhood.

They were exhausted and haunted by the night. They and the first police officers on the scene had risked their lives to save as many of the seniors as possible.

One after a nursing home fire devastated a small Quebec town, Alex Roslin revisits that fateful night and asks whether continued political apathy on safety measures might expose how we value the vulnerable.

O N THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BUILDING, a smoke alarm had also woken up Arnaud Côté, 84, another retired dairy farmer. He moved into the home seven years ago after his wife passed away and was living in a room on the second floor. He grabbed a small yellow flashlight, stepped into the hallway and smelled smoke. His neighbour came out at the same time. Côte rushed down the hall to alert another neighbour, but the room was locked. He banged on the wall with a fist.

“Help!” she screamed to get their attention. “Help!”

She wasn’t sure if they could hear amid the chaos and strong wind. She saw another resident on a third- floor balcony above. It was Colette Lafrance, 80, whom she had known since they were girls. Colette had gone onto the balcony after seeing thick smoke in the hall outside her room. Jacqueline saw her friend jump onto the roof of the second floor of the building. The snow there broke her fall. The two women started yelling together.

“Help!”
A fireman had run into the home three times without a mask, holding his breath and slamming down doors to drag people to safety. Another had somehow convinced an elderly man to jump to safety from a third-floor balcony. 

Dozens of firefighters and police officers had come across Quebec to help. Perron and Brazeau put their experience to work helping to co-ordinate everyone. Perron said it’s easy to think it’s going to be someone else’s grandmother. But the fact is this will touch you and your family soon enough. No one wants to know their parents’ lives ended like that.

It doesn’t help that the provinces and even some municipalities have a mismatch of rules for seniors homes, which house 400,000 Canadians. In Ontario, 40 per cent of privately run retirement homes have no sprinklers. The rate is 54 per cent in Quebec and 70 per cent in Alberta. In Nova Scotia, fire marshal Harold Pothier did not even know how many seniors homes had sprinklers. The Halifax Chronicle Herald reported in January.

Only three provinces — Newfoundland, P.E.I. and Ontario — plus Yukon require sprinklers in all seniors homes, new and old. Ontario this year introduced a requirement for sprinklers to be retrofitted into existing seniors homes, but owners got five to 10 years to comply, depending on the facility. The delay is too long, Eng said, considering the risk and the fact that the province is giving subsidies for the work.

There’s been more progress south of the border. After fires in two seniors homes killed 24 residents in 2003, the U.S. required all existing nursing homes that get Medicaid or Medicare funds to install sprinklers by 2013.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

“It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

“It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

“It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

“It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

“It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

“It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

“It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

“It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.

“Since 1969, more than 130 Canadian seniors homes have killed in fires in residences where they and their families feel they are the most secure. It’s absolutely just unacceptable,” said Shayne Mintz, a former fire chief in Burlington, Ont., and now the NFPA’s Canadian regional director.

“It’s not to say that other fire safety measures aren’t important, too — approved fire safety plans, fire drills, self-closing doors and firewalls to stop fires from spreading, staff trained to help seniors evacuate. But of all the measures, sprinklers are the most critical for seniors homes, Mintz said. “Sprinklers are the single best means of fire protection outside a well-trained fire department. They’re absolutely critical in these homes.”

In his home office in Ontario’s Blue Mountains ski village, a short walk from Georgian Bay, Mintz remembers the fire that killed seven at Brockville’s Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, in 2003.
rupt contracts. Why was L’Isle Verte any different?

A few days later, Perron’s association of fire chiefs called publicly for a national fire commission. Cyril Delage to do a public coroner’s inquest into the fire. They said the investigations under way at that point (the Quebec coroner’s office was also doing inquiries narrowly focused on the cause of death of each deceased) would not be able to determine fire safety in seniors homes and whether they should be equipped with sprinklers. A public inquest could consolidate all of the deaths into a single investigation and hold public hear- ings into the bigger questions.

The reaction in Quebec City was cool. First, Quebec of- ficials said a decision would have to wait until the body recovery was finished. Then, the police investigation was blamed again. When then-premier Pauline Marois came to L’Isle Verte after the fire, she lamented: “If only we were able to prevent this type of thing from ever happening again.” Columnist Christinne Blatchford, quoting Marois in a National Post piece, retorted angrily, “If only we were able to stop such fires!” Automatic sprinklers do pre- cisely that… Let me be perfectly clear – there is nothing to study. Sprinklers work.

Fire chiefs were briefly hopeful when Liberal leader Philippe Couillard took over as premier after the prov- incial election in April. While still in opposition, he had supported a public inquiry. But once elected, Couillard stalled, too. The provincial government had yet to act.

The reason for the stonewalling wasn’t really a mystery. It was fairly obvious what Delage would say. He’d been say- ing it for more than 20 years. And now, it had come to this – Quebec’s heartland had seen one of Canada’s deadliest fires in seniors homes for what. “What will come out is the weakness of the regulations and lack of sprinklers. This is where the government will feel uncomfortable,” Perron said.

A broader inquiry would also lead to debate about even more fundamental questions, no less uncomfortable for Quebec and other governments across Canada. How much are seniors valued in Canadian society? What kind of life awaits Canadians as they age, and what do they need to do to ensure it’s a happy one, not cut short in a poorly regu- lated system?

These questions are increasingly critical to the coun- try’s aging citizens, said CARP’s Susan Eng. And they don’t like the answers. Working from her office in down- town Toronto’s Liberty Village neighbourhood, Eng has brought a personal cause to the national stage. She came onboard in 2008. Previously, she had been the outspoken chair of the Metropolitan Toronto Police Services Board, where she championed police accountability.

“Today’s seniors are not your grandmother’s seniors,” she said. “They’re a huge pro-active generation that won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. Politicians had better pay attention.

In case of point: Ontario’s decision last year to require sprinkler retrofits in all seniors homes. Fires in the homes had killed 50 Ontario seniors since 1980. The province relented in large part due to determined lobbying by Ontario fire chiefs, CARP and other seniors. “This is a group,” Eng said, “that has growing clout.”

The other end of the country, Stephen Gamble was shocked by the fire in Quebec and alarmed by the prematurity from the province. The 36-year veteran firefigh- ter is the fire chief in the leafy semi-rural township of Langley, B.C., 50 kilometres east of Vancouver, and former president of the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs. “People say, ‘If only we had known how to stop this fire.’ We have known. Sprinklers are not new tech- nology. We’ve had them 100 years,” he said.

Outside his office in Fire Hall 86, he checks off the build- ings equipped with sprinklers – a township development, a mall – and those without: the single-family houses down the street. “I wish I could say the same for them,” he said.

Gamble knows the lack of sprinklers is a problem across Canada, not just in Quebec. Thirty-six of B.C.’s 573 senio- r homes were not fully sprinklered, as of a government survey last March. On April 3, 2013, one of those un- sprinklered residences caught fire in the City of Langley – the four-storey Elm seniors apartment building.

Gamble and other Langley township firefights at- tended to assist city fire crews with the fire. “They had a fire at the other end of the country, the fire chief in Ottawa with cabinet ministers, MPs and federal bureau- crats. Forty fire chiefs came from across the country to ask them to improve fire safety in seniors homes.

Their target was the National Fire Code, a model code that dictates how fire safety regulations are enforced across the country. The National Fire Code is updated every five years, and a new code is due out in 2015 – perfect timing for Gamble. The fire chiefs pleaded with the officials to amend the new fire code to require sprink- lers in existing seniors homes.

Fire chief Daniel Perron, as the Canadian association’s Quebec board member, also came to Ottawa. One of his meetings was with Liberal Opposition leader Justin Trudeau, who responded “favourably, of course, like all the politicians we met. Who can be against vitals?” Perron asked with a hint of irony.

Afterward, the fire chiefs went home encouraged by the positive response. But in an interview, the bureaucrat in charge of the fire code rejected the fire chiefs’ idea and pas- sed the ball back right to the provinces. “We don’t want the fire code to be a tool to do things retroactively. This has to happen at the provincial level because every province knows what is appropriate in its jurisdiction. It’s not something a technical body like us can deter- mine,” said Philip Ricca, chair of a federal commission that oversees the fire and building codes as part of the National Research Council.

Gamble is incredulous. “It’s a political decision. It runs like nobody wants to make a move on anything. We’re asking for the federal government to show leader- ship so we don’t have to say again, ‘If only we had known.”

Shayne Mintz of the NFPA, who also went to Ottawa, shakes his head, too. “This is a fire code issue,” he said. As a precedent, he cited the Ontario Fire Code, which con- tains an entire chapter, Part 9, titled Retrofit, solely de- voted to requiring retrofits in existing buildings. “Every requirement in Part 9 was a result of a large fire loss or fatalities. You retrofit where you have large gaps. What’s wrong with this model? I don’t get it.”

The campaign fails to amend the National Fire Code in 2015, the fire chiefs will have to wait five more years until the next update in 2020. In the meantime, though, Canadians have to make matters into their own hands. He suggests avoiding seniors homes without proper fire safety preparedness, including a full complement of sprinklers.

And it leaves Susan Eng of CARP flabbergasted: “Of course there are laws in this country. Should there be any difference in any province?” And seniors overwhelmingly agree. In a survey of 3,100 CARP mem- bers in the days after L’Isle Verte, four in five said Ottawa should set national standards for fire safety in seniors homes. A whopping 86 per cent said all seniors homes should be retrofitted with sprinklers.

The office of Minister of State for Science and Technology Ed Holder, who oversees the National Research Council, didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Susan Eng also wants to make a big- ger point. Security in seniors homes is about more than fire safety. It’s also about seniors keep- ing their autonomy and agency, which are as vital to staying healthy. “We have to start shaping insti- tutions,” Eng said. “Whose life is this anyway? My world should suit me, I shouldn’t have to shoehorn myself into it. That’s crucial to a person’s sense of well-being.”

Surveying the state of seniors homes in Quebec called La Brumante. In English, the name means The Twilight. Gaston Michaud, the home’s founder and president, explains: “We say seniors have the whole evening ahead of us and we want to enjoy it.”

Hard roads lead to La Brumante, a home for seniors living on a farm outside the village during the Depression. His uncle Paul, 88, lived in the Résidence du Havre and was killed in the fire. “It was a cataclysm. The village stopped living for a month,” he said.

In La Brumante, Michaud recreated something of L’Isle Verte’s tight, long-lasting community bonds and self- reliance. The extraordinary result: the home’s residents seem almost unaffected by age. Averaging 85 years old, they tend a vegetable garden and organize a host of activi- ties. “We have a gymnasium, a dance studio, a library, a ball, community dinners, musical shows, bingo. There’s always a jigsaw puzzle on the go in the common room.”

Two residents in their 70s just came back from a cruise in the Magdalen Islands. Others went camping and several were at a party under way for the 101st birthday party of the oldest resident. “He’s in great health and still laughs a lot,” Michaud, 78, said. The 21 residents are all autonomous and rarely need hospital care or a long-term care bed before they pass away.

Their secret: they run the home. Continued on page 100
Fire and Ice

L’Isle Verte Nursing Home Fire
Continued from page 77

themselves. “They often say, ‘We don’t want to die because we have paradise here.’ All the capacities of the residents are put to work. It’s self-help, not help from above. We still have capabilities even if we’re 95 years old,” Michaud said.

Even the home’s location was chosen with care – the heart of the bucolic Eastern Townships village of Racine where most of the home’s residents have lived their lives (“You don’t transplant an old tree,” Michaud says). Next door is a beautiful 108-year-old stone church, and steps away is the local farmers market co-op (which Michaud also founded). Kids from the neighbouring school visit regularly to sing songs and show off Halloween costumes.

La Brunante is a special type of home called a seniors residential solidarity co-op. In Quebec, it’s often just called “the Racine model.” Since opening in 2003, the non-profit has inspired 17 other such homes in Quebec. Michaud was invited last year to talk about the phenomenon at the World Health Organization’s conference on age-friendly cities in Quebec City.

The province and community jointly funded construction, and locals help on the board. Thanks to reduced health spending on the residents, Michaud believes the province has gotten back double its expenditure on the co-op. “Co-operation is the antidote to aging,” he said.

ACK IN L’ISLE VERTE, by July, it looked like fire chief Daniel Perron’s fears were coming to pass. The fire had faded from the public eye. “No fire regulations have changed since the fire, absolutely nothing,” he said. Then, the two co-owners of the Résidence du Havre and their insurer filed a $3.8-million lawsuit against the village of L’Isle Verte, alleging that firefighters had committed “serious and basic errors” in the fire. Even though Daniel Perron, the fire chief, had worked closely with those firefighters, he welcomed the suit. “With no inquiry, it may be the only way to shed light on what happened and change things.”

In August, the co-owners, via their lawyer Guy Bertrand, renewed the demand for a public inquiry, raising additional concerns about how firefighters responded. “We sincerely believe they could have saved almost everyone if there had been a better response,” Bertrand said.

The province finally relented, announcing a public coroner’s inquest into the fire – to be held by none other than fire commissioner Cyrille Délâge. Somehow, it now turned out, a public inquiry was possible in parallel with a police investigation. Fire chief Perron forwarded the press release minutes after it came out. “This announcement is the result of public and the fire service pressure,” he said. We can only imagine how scathing Commissioner Délâge will be this time around.

Quebec’s health and social services ministry refused a request for an interview for this story. It referred questions to the public security ministry and the Régie du bâtiment du Québec, an agency that oversees the province’s building code. Clément Falardeau, a public security ministry spokesman, said he didn’t know why the province had ignored previous coroner’s recommendations. The Régie du bâtiment didn’t return calls.

IN AUGUST, A MEMORIAL WALL OF PHOTOS of the 32 seniors who died in the fire still stood in the 159-year-old Église de l’Isle Verte church. A note beside the photos bid farewell to “our treasures, pioneers on our lands, memory of our past that rebuilds the future.” In this extremely tight-knit community, most of the history isn’t in the local archives or a museum. It’s in the seniors homes, in the memories of the residents.

Across the street from the church, the Villa Rose des Vents seniors home is alive with memory. The home is in the 92-year-old former convent of the Soeurs du Saint-Rosaire nuns order. It once housed the village school.

One Sunday after lunch, Jacqueline Dumont and Arnaud Côté, who live here now, talk about the fire in the dining room with the 10 other residents, all old friends. “Sprinklers could have helped. They would have slowed the fire down,” Côté said. Jacqueline nodded.

Talk eventually turned to happier memories. “We all used to go to school in this building,” one woman said. “I have my old desk in my room.”

Jacqueline reminisced about her husband, Louis-Cyrice. Orphaned as a child, he was adopted in L’Isle Verte by an elderly couple with no children. Jacqueline knew him since they were kids. Everyone in the room came to their wedding in the church across the street.

“In 1949,” one woman said.

“We were married in 1949?” Jacqueline asked, thinking. “No, you were in 1949. We were in 1948.”

Jacqueline said one of her ancestors was the first Dumont to settle in L’Isle Verte, Jacques Guérêt-Dumont, who came from Normandy, France, in 1690. His home still stands down the street.

“We’re ‘Barlettes,’” she said with a laugh. “That’s what they call people from L’Isle Verte.”

The name comes from a local French word for smelt, which generations of villagers have fished out of the St. Lawrence in winter through holes made in the thick ice.

“Everyone does that here,” Jacqueline said. “Who doesn’t love that?”

Everybody nodded.

The night of the fire, other memories and a big part of the village’s history vanished into the cold northern wind, brutally and needlessly. 2