

# Fire and Ice

A year 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

**IT WAS ONE OF THE COLDEST DAYS** of an unusually nasty winter, even for L'Isle 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.

Fifty-two elderly denizens of L'Isle Verte huddled in warmth in the Résidence du Havre seniors home, gazing out at the colourful row of ice fishing shacks 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 here 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 in 1535 and noted the small lush green island just offshore that gave the village its name.

Like many of the residents, Jacqueline and Louis-Cyrice had spent their lives tending a dairy farm. Theirs had been on the banks of the St. Lawrence just across the street from where the Résidence du Havre now stood. The people here didn't have much, but they had what they needed. The kids played baseball with a ball made out of a potato wrapped in cowhide. Their Christmas present was oranges. But the fish used to be so thick in the water it was said you could plunge in a pail to catch dinner. And

the couple, along with their cows, had delighted in a gorgeous landscape, with a sunset that locals say is one of the most beautiful in the world.

Jacqueline and Louis-Cyrice had moved into the home 10 months before when his health deteriorated and he needed more care. She moved in simply to be by her 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 watching over her from the photos on her walls. She was the oldest of six sisters and seven brothers. Her room was a family museum of the clan's photos and keepsakes, including those of her own eight children, 14 grandkids and nine great-grandchildren.

Just after midnight, a smoke alarm went off down the hall and woke her up. She went to her door, but it was locked. It 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 her 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, hoisting her over the barrier onto the ladder.

"Go down," he said.

She was facing the wrong way, outward, but this was no time to quibble. She climbed down the ladder a step at a time as cinders continued landing in her hair. 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 fire. 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.

**ON 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. Côté rushed down the hall to alert another neighbour, but the room was locked. He banged on the wall with a fist.

"Wake up," he shouted. "There's a fire in the hall. We have to save ourselves."

He then woke one more neighbour and ushered 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. Côté was later nominated for a Governor General's Award for Bravery.

**THE NEXT MORNING AT 7 A.M.**, the phone rang at the home of Daniel Perron, the fire chief in the Montreal suburb of Sainte-Julie. Perron, a 34-year veteran firefighter, was secretary of the executive committee of the 1,000-member Quebec Association of Fire Chiefs. On the phone was Daniel Brazeau, the association's president.

"Did you see the news?" Brazeau asked.

"No."

"Turn on the TV," Brazeau said.

The fire in L'Isle 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'Isle 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 Lac Mégantic in Quebec's Eastern Townships region, where a 74-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 149 years.

That had been a horror show, but Perron was now headed to what he'd later say was the most terrible fire call of his career. He had had a colourful professional life, serving as a Coast Guard officer and RCMP officer, then becoming a firefighter and earning a Queen's Diamond 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 lay an untold number of 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 of- ➤

ficer had run into the home three times without a mask, holding his breath and smashing down doors to drag people to safety. Another had somehow persuaded an elderly man to jump to safety from a third-floor balcony.

Dozens of firefighters and police officers had come from across Quebec to help. Perron and Brazeau put their experience to work helping to co-ordinate everyone. Perron, with the local and regional fire departments, would organize moral and technical support, logistics and human resources. The scale of the community's loss and the horrendous body-recovery work to come were hard to fathom, even after Lac Mégantic.

Extricating the bodies while temperatures remained below -20 ended up requiring a special machine used to de-ice ships, which could generate 300 C steam to melt the ice. Working 12-hour days for a month, dozens of police technicians, firefighters, coroners and pathologists crawled on their knees through the debris, picking inch by inch to recover 28 bodies. Even then, the bodies of four missing seniors were never found.

**A**MID THE BUSY WORK, Perron couldn't help remark on a striking fact. Only half of the Résidence du Havre was actually destroyed in the fire. The other half was virtually untouched, not even appearing to need a paint job. The key difference between the two sections: the destroyed part didn't have automatic sprinklers; the intact part did.

The ruined section, built in 1997, is where Jacqueline Dumont and her husband had lived and where the fire appears to have started. Almost everyone in this section of the home seems to have been killed. The newer section was added in an expansion in 2002. It included sprinklers and a thick concrete firewall to stop a fire from spreading. This is where Arnaud Côté lived and was able to save his neighbours. Everyone in Côté's part of the home apparently survived, even some who used a wheelchair.

It wasn't clear which – sprinklers or firewall – saved the newer section. But it was clear to Perron that sprinklers in the older section could have saved lives. "Obviously, obviously. We would never have had the fire we saw. A sprinkler is like having a firefighter in your building. It's the ultimate method of protection," he said.

For years, Perron's association, the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, and seniors groups have implored Quebec and other provinces to require sprinklers in all seniors homes. Canada has the worst record of any country outside the U.S. for deaths in seniors homes, with four fires in the top 14 deadliest non-U.S. blazes recorded from 1950 to 2004. Japan and France were next with two fires apiece, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), a U.S.-based nonprofit that develops

fire safety codes used by governments worldwide, including in Canada, and has 70,000 members in 100 countries.

"We have the right to be safe. It's an issue of human rights. If a nursing home isn't safe – the place seniors go to be safe – there is a fatal flaw," said Susan Eng, a lawyer and vice-president of advocacy at CARP, Canada's largest seniors association with more than 300,000 members.

"Most of us never think it's going to be us. 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 mishmash 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 didn't 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 11 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 140 Canadian seniors have been 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, he said. "Sprinklers are the most effective 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 exact day he became a firefighter – Nov. 14, 1977 – "the best day of my life, apart from my wedding and the birth of my daughters." Over the years, he has attended "several" fires at seniors homes. "There can't be anything more terrifying for a senior than trying to convince them to come with you down a ladder through the window," he said.

He likes to use a YouTube video to show the value of sprinklers. Fire safety advocates set up two model living rooms – one with a sprinkler, the other without – and then light a fire in the trash can. In the first room, the sprinkler turns on after 14 seconds. Seconds later, the fire

is out, with only a few small burns on the curtains. The other room takes 90 seconds to achieve flashover, when fire fills a room and temperatures can hit 1,000 F. "That's faster than it takes the fire department to arrive after they've been notified. People don't realize how quickly fire spreads," Mintz said.

The stakes were brought into dramatic relief in a B.C. study in 2013. It looked at all 860 fires reported in the province in homes and apartment buildings that had sprinklers from 2006 to 2011. Only one person died. Meanwhile, 143 people were killed in 8,981 fires in unsprinklered residences. The death rate was 13 times higher without sprinklers.

The challenge for seniors homes is greater today, Mintz said, because they're filled with synthetic-based furnishings. Firefighters liken them to "solid gasoline." They're much more flammable than the wood, cotton and other natural materials used in older household items. A YouTube video shows the difference. Two side-by-side living rooms are set on fire – one with naturally made legacy products and materials, the other with modern furnishings. The first takes 29 minutes, 25 seconds to achieve flashover, the second takes three minutes, 40 seconds.

**A**FTER RETURNING HOME, Perron was worried. He knew action to make seniors homes safer needed to happen quickly before politicians and journalists lost interest. L'Isle Verte wasn't the first devastating fire in a Canadian seniors home. We had already been down this road before.

At 5:30 a.m. on April 7, 1992, a fire erupted in the Father Dowd Memorial Home seniors residence in Montreal, killing seven people. Sprinklers would have "greatly reduced" the number of deaths, said coroner Cyrille Dêlâge, the province's fire commissioner, in a scathing report. "This kind of fire protection must be obligatory in all places where the evacuation of the residents is difficult because of their physical condition."

Four years later, on Aug. 31, 1996, another fire erupted in the Villa Sainte-Geneviève seniors home in Montreal's West Island, killing seven residents. Dêlâge was again



called in. He said sprinklers could have saved lives and, this time, called on Quebec to require sprinklers in all seniors homes within two years and give owners subsidies for the renovations. "Do we still need other examples of this kind to act?" he asked.

Evidently, we did. Quebec ignored Dêlâge's recommendations again.

In 2009, yet another seniors home fire killed four people in Chicoutimi. This time, even the Quebec Association of Private Seniors Homes called for regulations to force its own members to install sprinklers, so long as there was financial aid. "What we sell is security. I said, 'This can't happen again. We have to go faster, or there will be more deaths,'" said Yves Desjardins, the association's president. "For the government, it was a question of cost and priority. There was no urgency." (Retrofitting all seniors homes in the province would cost an estimated \$80 million.)

Desjardins knows fire safety. He previously worked as a fire safety inspector, taught fire prevention to firefighters and was founding director of the province's school for firefighters, the *École nationale des pompiers du Québec*. On a credenza in his office sits a firefighter's helmet and a model of a 1934 Seagrave fire engine. He choked up as he spoke about L'Isle Verte. "I'm sorry," he said after a long pause, clearing his nose. "I never thought I'd see a tragedy like this in Quebec."

Daniel Perron, the fire chief, worried that the L'Isle Verte fire, unimaginable as it had been, could be forgotten, too, like all the earlier fires. "It's incredible how everyone tears their shirt in public after the fires, saying, 'How could this happen?'"

Troublesome signs of dissembling had started even before the L'Isle Verte fire was completely extinguished. That first day, Perron ran into Quebec's then-public security minister, Stéphane Bergeron, in the village. He asked Bergeron to hold a public coroner's inquest into the fire to establish what had gone wrong and how to prevent such fires in future. Bergeron was noncommittal, saying a police investigation was underway and would have to finish first.

This explanation didn't make sense to Perron. At that moment, Quebec was seeing near-daily scandalous revelations from the Charbonneau commission, a high-profile public inquiry into corruption in government contracts. That inquiry was going on at the same time as several police investigations into the very same cor- ➤

PHOTOGRAPHY, RANDY RISLING/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES (FIREFIGHTERS AND ICE BACKGROUND)

rupt contracts. Why was L'Isle Verte any different?

A few days later, Perron's association of fire chiefs called publicly on Quebec to appoint fire commissioner Cyrille D'Élève 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) wouldn't look at broader questions, such as 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 hearings into the bigger questions.

The reaction in Quebec City was cool. First, Quebec officials 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 stop this type of thing from ever happening again." Columnist Christie Blatchford, quoting Marois in a *National Post* piece, retorted angrily, "If only we were able to stop such fires? Automatic sprinklers do precisely 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 provincial election in April. While still in opposition, he had supported a public inquiry. But once elected, Couillard stalled, too, citing the police investigation.

The reason for the stonewalling wasn't really a mystery. It was fairly obvious what D'Élève would say. He'd been saying it for more than 20 years. And now, it had come to this – Quebec's heartland had seen one of Canada's deadliest seniors home fires. "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 regulated seniors home or neglected health system?

These questions are increasingly critical to the country's aging citizens, said CARP's Susan Eng. And they don't like the answers. Working from her office in downtown Toronto's Liberty Village neighbourhood, Eng has brought a forceful voice to CARP since 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."

Case in 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."

**A T THE OTHER END OF THE COUNTRY,** Stephen Gamble was shocked by the fire in Quebec and alarmed by the prevarication from the province. The 36-year veteran firefighter 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 technology. We've had them 100 years," he said.

Outside his office in Fire Hall #6, he checks off the buildings 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 seniors homes were not fully sprinklered, as of a government survey last March. On April 3, 2013, one of those unsprinklered residences caught fire in the City of Langley – the four-storey Elm seniors apartment building.

Gamble and other Langley township firefighters attended to assist city fire crews with the fire. "They had a hard time pushing open a door. There was a person lying on the ground leaning against it on the other side," he said.

The man, 80, lay beside his walker steps away from getting out. He was later pronounced dead. Twelve other seniors were hospitalized, three with critical injuries. "I probably said it half a dozen times that day and in the next days: I wish there were sprinklers in that home," Gamble said.

But even after that fire and the one in L'Isle Verte, B.C. has yet to require those 36 homes to install sprinklers. Other provinces have also dodged action. In Manitoba, where half of personal care homes aren't fully sprinklered, provincial Labour and Immigration Minister Erna Braun said in February her province would not require retrofits. In Alberta, the province said in August it had budgeted enough to retrofit only five seniors homes this year out of 202 without sprinklers.

After L'Isle Verte, Gamble decided action at the national level may be the best way to get the foot-dragging provinces to move. He decided that getting sprinklers in all seniors homes in Canada had to become his association's top priority. The fire chiefs had the perfect platform:



their upcoming annual lobbying session in March in Ottawa with cabinet ministers, MPs and federal bureaucrats. 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 of best practices that provinces use as the basis for their own fire codes. It currently has no provision requiring sprinklers in seniors homes. 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 next fire code to require sprinklers 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 virtue?" 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 passed the ball right back 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 determine," said Philip Rizcallah, 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 seems like nobody wants to make a move on anything. We're asking for the federal government to show leadership 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 contains an entire chapter, Part 9, titled Retrofit, solely devoted 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."

PHOTOGRAPHY, RANDY RISLING/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES

If 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 meanwhile, Mintz says Canadians have to take matters into their own hands. He suggests avoiding seniors homes without proper fire safety preparedness, including a full complement of sprinklers.

It all leaves Susan Eng of CARP flabbergasted: "Of course, there have to be national standards. Why should there be any difference in any province?" And seniors overwhelmingly agree. In a survey of 3,100 CARP members in the days after L'Isle Verte, four in five said Ottawa should set national standards for fire safety in seniors homes. A whopping 98 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 BIGGER POINT.** Security in seniors homes is about more than fire safety. It's also about seniors keeping their autonomy and agency, which are just as vital to staying healthy. "We have to start shaping institutions," 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."

She points to a remarkable award-winning seniors home in Quebec called La Brunante. 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."

Michaud has a connection to L'Isle Verte. He was raised 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 Brunante, 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 activities open to the community – storytelling, beanbag baseball, 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 strawberry picking. Preparations are 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** ▶

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.

**B**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.

**I**N 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-Cyric. 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 plucked 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. ☒