

Marlis Momber Highlight

My name is Marlis Momber, I have lived in this apartment, in this building, for 38 years, very much involved with my work as a photographer.

The worst case, most tragic case—it probably happened much more than we know, that people really perished in those fires—was the building on Avenue D, right here, between 5th and 6th Street. We all knew that homeless people lived in there. The other homeless people tried to stop the people from the fire department. They wanted them to go in there and find the people first. They were sure they were in there. The fire was already blazing. And they didn't.

I have photos of one man, one homeless man, climbing the walls, trying to get to his friends. He was drunk, but I think if I had a pint of something, I would have done that, too, at that point, in his shoes, in his situation. It was really, really, really hard to take. Then you saw those crumbling walls, and you knew there might have been people. Or even dogs, cats—who knows?—in there. It was arson. It was planned arson.

So what happened is, in the beginning they just did kind of little fires. Then they collected the insurance, sold the buildings within their family. The next acted exactly the same way, and they would come every day or every month, and knock on their doors and give them a new rent bill, and in English—no translation, no nothing. People were scared. When they had the money, they paid. When not, they had to move out and find something else. They were vagrants. Whole families. Displacement.