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Gramercy Park Blaze Injures 8

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STAFF WRITERS

An early morning fire engulfed a Manhattan apartment yesterday, injuring eight people — one critically — and sending dozens of residents through stairways and onto fire escapes to avoid the flames and smoke, officials said.

The two-alarm blaze at 340 E. 18th St., a six-story brick building in Gramercy Park, began shortly before 5:30 a.m. in a third-floor apartment, said Firefighter Jack Thompson, a Fire Department spokesman. Marshals believe the fire started in a bedroom and was caused by an electrical strip, he said. Among other things, a computer was plugged into the strip.

Thompson said residents survived because a smoke alarm sounded. "The smoke detector went off," he said. "That's the message we want to get out: Smoke detectors save lives."

More than 100 firefighters responded to the fire, which was under control at 6:11 a.m., Thompson said. Two firefighters suffered back and shoulder injuries while pulling the critically injured woman to safety. The firefighters were taken to Beth Israel Medical Center.

The woman, identified by police as Isabelle Heina, 21, was taken to New York Weill Cornell Center with burns to more than 50 percent of her body. She was expected to survive. One other woman was burned but not seriously. Most of the other victims suffered smoke inhalation. Four were taken to New York Weill Cornell Center; two were taken to Bellevue Hospital Center. One person was treated at the scene.

Thompson said there was some damage to the apartment above. The building, which has about 25 units, is home to a lot of college students, residents said. The injured were believed to be New York University students.

Some residents described the escape as organized, with some banging on doors, urging people to leave. "People were yelling on the fire escape: 'Come out, come out!'" said Joel Withrow, 19, an NYU sophomore who lives on the fourth floor.

Other residents initially thought the commotion was another party. "We thought it was just another Friday night," said Lauren McArthur, 19, a sophomore at Parsons who lives on the fourth floor. "But then we heard people screaming."

Some residents on the block said more than a dozen people were in the apartment at the time of the fire.

"They always have party, every day, every day," said a woman who lives on the floor. She refused to give her name.

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