

CITY LIFE

MOVE: An Oral History

For years, the hostility between the city and the radical West Philly group MOVE had escalated. But nobody was prepared for the horrific way the fight would end one May afternoon in 1985. Now, decades later, the people who were there that day tell the still-unbelievable story.

by **VICTOR FIORILLO** • 3/26/2010, 6:00 a.m.

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"Son, they're going to drop a bomb."

Photo: Tom Galish/Philadelphia Inquirer


IT WAS A standoff years in the making at 6221 Osage Avenue — the headquarters of a group called MOVE. The neighbors were fed up. The cops had warrants. And the members of the extremist back-to-nature organization had barricaded themselves inside. Their demand? Justice for nine MOVE members incarcerated — wrongly, some say — for the 1978 murder of Officer James Ramp. On May 13, 1985, shots rang out. Bystanders — including a young Michael Nutter — took cover.

And then, as the sun began to set, a police helicopter flew in and released a bag filled with explosives onto the headquarters, making ours the only American city ever to drop a bomb on its own citizens. At the end of the day, 61 houses blazed, and 11 people — five of them children — died, the nightmarish images forever burned into Philadelphia's consciousness. Here, the people who lived through it tell the extraordinary story of the MOVE bombing.

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Ramona Africa, *MOVE spokesperson and the sole adult survivor of the 1985 fire*: MOVE was formed in 1972 by John Africa. He gave us one common belief, in the all-importance of life. We had peaceful demonstrations: the Zoo, the circus, furriers, Dow, du Pont, and unsafe boarding homes for the elderly.

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Andino R. Ward, *father of Birdie Africa (aka Michael Moses Ward, who died in 2013), the sole child survivor of the 1985 fire*: One day in the early '70s, my wife Rhonda had a friend who was telling her about this group, MOVE. At this point, Rhonda and I were separated. Not long thereafter, I went to her mom's house to pick up Mike. Her mom said they no longer lived there, she's with MOVE. I went to the Powelton MOVE house, almost went to blows with John Africa. Then a guy came with a hatchet, so I got out of there. Later, Rhonda told me that her new family was MOVE, that John Africa was Mike's father, that I could forget any involvement.

Michael Nutter, *current mayor*: In the late '70s, there were various public activities involving MOVE. I was studying at Penn, and really only generally aware of them.

James Berghaier, *retired Philly police officer*: I'd see them acting up in the courtroom, but I didn't give them any credibility.

Ramona Africa: The cops would come out and tell us we had to break down and go away. MOVE would not accept that.

Tigre Hill, *director of The Barrel of a Gun, a film about Mumia Abu-Jamal*: John Africa came to be at a time of all the cults. Tim Leary. Jim Jones. John Africa wanted to blow up capitals. They were anti-cop, anti-government, anti-technology.

Sam Katz, *three-time mayoral candidate*: These folks made life in the neighborhood intolerable — they were disruptive of civil life to the extreme.