

In support of



people stop and take note of major disasters such as earthquakes, floods, tornadoes and landslides, but hardly notice smaller events such as house fires. But fires are devastating to those involved, often leaving them destitute and mourning over lost loved ones. In some cases the victims land up with people like Bronwen Jones.

In busy Johannesburg, Bronwen Jones has dedicated her life to running a shelter for children who have been burned. Children of Fire is a foundation that brings hope to many burn victims, some burned beyond recognition. Not only does Bronwen fight to find money for their medical care, but also for the mending of the most devastating long-term problem - physical disfigurement.

Needing a home with enough space for all the children, Bronwen thought her prayers has been answered when she saw a large house advertised for sale in Auckland Park in November 2004. The house has been extended numerous times with hallways, rooms and interesting spaces. The outside is a playground of sandpits, jungle gyms and a lovely pool for summer - the ideal place for these young victims to heal while they enjoy the love and attention every child deserves. The price was steep but Bronwen is very determined - she found a way get the funds together. It was not easy, but the excitement of their new home was enough inspiration for her to push even harder.

The seller, apparently a well-off man who owns other properties, was eager to keep the deal going. With the purchase well on its way, Bronwen, who is a not an electrical expert, noticed more and more faults in the electrical installation. She repeatedly asked the seller for a Certificate of Compliance until she received, in January 2005, an undated page 1 and 4 of the certificate. Requesting the full document again and again, she was faxed all four pages dated 11 February, and finally posted the original certificate in March. By now she was convinced that she had been taken for a ride on the electrical installation of their dream house. Bronwen is a researcher by nature and started the painfully slow process of attempting to create a safe environment for the disabled children by confronting the guilty parties.

When she approached the seller of the property, he shrugged and denied any further involvement. From there she approached the contractor and then the Department of Labour. Bronwen's case is still pending and will be seen to in due course. But she needs the property to be safe so the children can move into their new home. They have been looking forward to the move, but for them there is a long road of legal letters ahead. Bronwen and "her children's" pleas were picked up by Carrol Beattie of EE Publishers and Vector (Journal of the Electrical Contractors Association of South Africa). Sensing Bronwen's distress and her understandably bad impression of the electrical contracting industry, Carrol approached the ECA(SA). As the association that acts as "the voice of the ECA Member and the accredited electrician" we had no hesitation to jump right in and assist. The contractor guilty of issuing the fraudulent certificate of compliance is not an ECA Member and therefore the association could not take direct action against him. That is in the hands of the Department of Labour. The "Children of Fire: In the Support of Safety" project was launched with immediate effect.

Together with a team of experts, it was decided to disconnect those parts of the house that were classified as "life-threatening". Some horrific problems were discovered. Live open wires lying wrapped in a plastic bag were evidence of a gate motor that had been removed. Loose wires were protruding from walls, and many other blatant contraventions of the electrical installation regulations were found. All those from the ECA who went there shook their heads in disbelief at the open bulbs hanging from ceilings. They estimated the cost for labour and material at close to R50 000, but the safety of innocent people were at stake. The ECA's members, together with EE Publishers, sponsored material, labour and financial assistance for the project.

The project commenced early in May with the urgent imperative to get the children safely into their new home. For them their electrical nightmare will have a happy ending. Their new home will carry a safe installation with ECA Members Vaughn Cliff and Standard Electrical on site. Only the best materials, sponsored by various role-players in the electrical industry, were installed. But who is to blame for situations like this? Is it the ignorance of the homeowner? The over-eager estate

agent or the fraudulent electrical contractor who does not work according to the regulations? Or do we point the finger at the regulatory bodies in the electrical industry?

According to the Occupational Health and Safety Act (No. 85 of 1993) Section 22 (Sale of Certain Articles Prohibited) provides that:

"...if any requirement (including any health and safety standard) in respect of any...machinery*...has been prescribed, no person shall sell or market in any manner whatsoever such... machinery...unless it complies with the requirement."
(* an electrical installation is defined as "machinery")

What this means is that if you sell or market an electrical installation (i.e. an electrified property), you need to make sure that it complies with the appropriate SABS Wiring Code (SANS 10142-1). If the installation is older than 1992, it is required to be "reasonably safe". A seller therefore hands the buyer a valid Certificate of Compliance to prove compliance with this requirement.

According to a strict reading of the above, an estate agent would therefore need to ensure that the electrical installation on a property is compliant before marketing the property. It is not clear how the courts would apply this aspect of the law.

But the Occupational Health and Safety Act also states that the user or lessee of an electrical installation shall be responsible for the safety, safe use and maintenance of the electrical installation he uses or leases. This puts the onus on the homeowner.

The Act also states that any person who intends to work as an electrical contractor shall register annually with the Electrical Contracting Board (ECB). Failure to register prohibits the contractor from performing electrical work.

To any non-electrical person it sounds like we all share the responsibility to some degree. Maybe the question should be: who's got the most to lose?

Request the Certificate of Compliance before opening the champagne to toast your new home. But how will you know the certificate is valid? Ensure at least that it was issued by an accredited electrician that is registered with the Electrical Contracting Board (ECB) or is a member of an association like the ECA(SA). Should there be any doubt in your mind about the electrical installation, get a second opinion from an accredited contractor and contact the experts for their advice.

For further information, queries or names of accredited electrical contractors, please contact ECA(SA) National Office (011) 392 0000 or e-mail us info@ecasa.co.za or Lisa Sonnekus for more information on the Children of Fire: In the Support of Safety Project ■