

Helen Jean and Duffy Arntz — and what's left of Lakeside Department Store.

Store owner calls for Lakeside to unite in rebuilding efforts

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It wasn't unusual for Helen Jean Meinhardi Arntz and her husband, Adolph C. "Duffy" Arntz, to poke around Lakeside Department Store when nobody else was there.

They'd been doing it for 21 years.

But Monday afternoon's visit to the store was different. They'd come to see the ruins.

Their store, a landmark in Lakeside, had burned to the ground Easter Sunday.

"Oh, look at my poor mannequin," Mrs. Arntz choked back her first tears of the afternoon. A bedraggled mannequin, wearing what once was a fine Easter outfit, stood amid broken glass, charred boards and bricks in the front window.

"I don't understand any of it," Mrs. Arntz said. And she kicked a brick across the sidewalk.

Seven stores were destroyed or damaged in the 1900 block of Lake Shore Drive Sunday. The Arntz's store, Lakeside Department Store, took the brunt of it. The blaze started in the back of the building and steadily

worked its way through. Firefighters say it is a total loss.

No estimate has been made of the damage to the building.

Lakeside Department Store was an old-fashioned, community store. The kind of place that carried everything from women's clothing to boys' underwear to embroidery thread.

The name Helen Jean Meinhardi has been synonymous with Lakeside Department Store since she bought it in 1951. She was one of the first businesswomen in the area. She ran the store and her 15 employees as if they were family.

"I worry about my darling girls more than anything else," Mrs. Arntz said. "I cried today. They all went to my aunt's funeral."

Despite occasional tears, Mrs. Arntz is quite stoical about the fire that destroyed \$175,000 worth of merchandise. But then, that's her style. Anyone who knows her, knows she doesn't like to "dilly-dally around," to quote a favorite phrase.

"I can see a lot of visions in my head," the 60-year-old woman said. "Should we rebuild? Get a developer in for our store? Or the whole block?"

She was thinking out loud. "I think all of Lakeside should rally behind this. We always said it was Lakeside against the world. Well, we'd better get together and redo this."

She stopped a minute. "But I'm only one person."

Earlier that morning, Victor Brant of 2395 E. Broadway had voiced his worries when he saw the damaged buildings on Lake Shore Drive: "There isn't anything left of Lakeside. I'm afraid it's going."

But Mrs. Arntz will have none of that talk. She grew up in Lakeside. Her dad, Caesar Meinhardi, was one of the first pharmacists at Runzel's Pharmacy, two stores away from her department store. She and Duffy just live up the street about a half-mile at 1469 Lake Shore.

"I can see lots of possibilities," she said. "This would make a wonderful Old Town."

She and her 66-year-old husband are "too old to do all that's necessary" to rebuild, she said. "But there have to be some young people who'd like an opportunity to buy into the business," she said. "My bod and Duff's bod just can't take it."

Arntz and she have owned the store together since the beginning; they were married 1½ years ago. Arntz was the silent partner for a good many years. Most people identified the store only with Helen Jean Meinhardi.

Neighborhood kids crowded around Mrs. Arntz when she visited the store Monday afternoon. Each one got a big hug.

"I've sort of forgotten how many kids got their start working here," she said. "Oh, I'd hate to see that change."

The Arntzes will set up a temporary office soon. A Lakeside neighbor, Barbara Saint Denis, has offered part of her art studio at 2005 Lake Shore for their use.

The store's 3,000-pound safe has been salvaged. All the accounts, orders and important papers are in there.

Even though plans aren't definite the idea of rebuilding appeals to Mrs. Arntz.

"Rebuilding could be a hobby for us," she said. "It would be love, something we could do together."