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A Summer Firepot, a 'Safe' Label, and Two Life-Altering Explosions

They said it was like napalm: it exploded in a flash, stuck to skin and clothing, and refused to stop burning.

A 14-year-old Long Island boy is fighting for his life after he was slathered with blazing, jellylike citronella fuel on May 28, when his cousin tried to light a ceramic firepot to prepare for a backyard wedding reception, but the quart bottle of fuel he was pouring instead burst into flames.

In Manhattan, a 24-year-old man has been on and off a ventilator after an almost identical blaze nearly killed him and badly wounded his best friend on June 3 as they were relaxing on the friend's terrace.

The two accidents, less than a week apart, involved the same product: a gel fuel for ceramic firepots, scented with citronella to ward off insects on hot summer nights, and purchased from Bed Bath & Beyond.

The fuel is marketed by the retailer as FireGel, "the Safe Pourable Gel." But survivors and witnesses to the two blazes likened it to a Molotov cocktail without so much as a wick.

"It's just like gasoline in a bottle," said Nancy Reyer, a single mother whose only child, Michael Hubbard, has been clinging to life in a hospital in Stony Brook on Long Island for nearly two weeks. "Watching my son just go up in flames like a tree — it just devastates me. I can't get that image out of my mind."

Relatives of the victims, and one survivor of the two local blazes, said the products came with understated warnings that gave no sense of how dangerous they could be to operate safely, and called for a recall or a ban.

"It should say 'lethal weapon,'" said Robert Mitzman, whose 24-year-old son, Jonathan, sustained serious burns on his arms in the Manhattan fire when he struggled to extinguish the flames that were raging on the face, arms and torso of his friend, Nick Stone.

Told by The New York Times about the two explosions in New York, Napa Home & Garden Inc., which manufactures the firepots and packages the fuel, asked Bed Bath & Beyond on Friday to pull both products from store shelves until it could add much more visually arresting new warning labels to both. A spokeswoman for Bed Bath & Beyond confirmed that stores nationwide were told to stop selling the products Friday afternoon.

And a spokesman for the Consumer Product Safety Commission said it was opening an investigation into what is a relatively new type of product on the marketplace.

The commission said it had received eight reports of explosions or burns involving firepots or fuel gel, several of them serious, since April 2010, not counting the New York cases. It is unclear what companies produced the products involved in those cases. Similar products, made by companies including Napa Home & Garden and BirdBrain Inc., began showing up at small retailers around 2008 and in major chains like Home Depot and Sam's Club in 2009.

Napa Home & Garden's president, Jerry Cunningham, also said he would remove from the fuel gel's label any language calling it "safe," which he said was meant only to convey that the fuel, a form of ethanol produced by Fuel Barons Inc. from recycled postconsumer waste, does not emit toxins when it burns.

Mr. Cunningham stressed that the fuel gel and firepots carried warnings not to refill the pots if they were still lighted or even hot. But he acknowledged that the warning label on the firepot was a small sticker on part of the pot's packaging, meant to be thrown away.

"You'd have an issue if somebody came along later and didn't know what they're doing," he said in an interview.

Gene Hammond, a vice president of Fuel Barons, said he was aware of only one claim for damages filed against the company out of hundreds of thousands of bottles sold. "This sounds like the worst thing I've ever heard of," he said of the New York episodes.

But he added that consumers' unfamiliarity with the fuel gel could pose an added risk. "There more than likely is a learning curve for the marketplace that needs to take place," he said.

The two cases in the New York area were eerily similar.

On May 28, in Riverhead, N.Y., Michael Hubbard, 14, was helping his mother and other relatives set up for a big family party the next day to celebrate his aunt's wedding. His mother, Ms. Reyer, saw a firepot and, thinking it was much like a citronella candle, suggested that her 15-year-old nephew, the bride's son, light it up.

When the gel did not seem to catch on fire, the boy added more fuel — and it "exploded into a fireball," according to Fran Reyer-Johnson, the bride. "There's no wick," she said. "That's the problem. You don't see that it's lit."

She said her new husband had bought the products and had carefully read the instructions, even trying out the firepots once to see how they worked. But he was not at home that night.

Ms. Reyer-Johnson said her son, her sister and Michael had no idea what they were dealing with. "They thought they were lighting a candle," she said.

Ms. Reyer-Johnson said on Friday that Michael's condition was grave: his heart stopped overnight and he was revived, but his organs have been failing.

In Manhattan on June 3, Jon Mitzman, a sales executive, lit two firepots on his Third Avenue terrace at about 10 p.m., preparing for a night of beer pong, hot dogs and relaxation with a group of friends on the eve of his 24th birthday. Half an hour later, before most of the guests had arrived, one of the pots burned out, he said in an interview from his hospital bed.

"It looked out, so I went to pour some more fuel in," he said. "All I heard was a bang."

The explosion did not hurt him, Mr. Mitzman said. But it covered Mr. Stone, 24, in the flaming jelly. Mr. Stone, who until recently had been working as a hotel doorman and an intern at The New York Post, dropped and rolled, but that only set the terrace floor on fire, Mr. Mitzman said. Another friend ran out with a blanket to smother the flames, but the blanket caught on fire. The two friends finally extinguished the flames on Mr. Stone's face with a sweatshirt, and led him into a shower to douse the rest.

Fire marshals who investigated noted the instructions on the product's label but drew no conclusions about whether it had been used incorrectly by Mr. Mitzman, according to a Fire Department official.

Mr. Mitzman said he had hoped to get out of the hospital in a week. Mr. Stone faces months of surgery and rehabilitation, his relatives said.

William K. Rashbaum contributed reporting.