Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Parents who were relieved to get their three children out of fire-engulfed house were stunned when pets were found alive among the ashes

Carrie and Kurt Kraus watched Thursday, July 5, as their home on Highway KW, west of Cedar Grove, was destroyed by fire, but their overriding reaction was feeling blessed because they, their three children — Brody, 6, Abby, 10, and Tyler, 12 — and, almost miraculously, their two dogs Jett and Rocket were alive.

Had it been an ordinary Thursday night, everyone would have been in bed when the fire started in the attached garage about 10:15 p.m., Mrs. Kraus said.

But both parents had taken Friday off, so the family stayed up later than usual.

Mrs. Kraus was lying in bed with Brody and Rocket slept nearby. Abby was in her bed with Jett and Mr. Kraus was on the computer at the far end of the house when Tyler saw smoke coming under the door to the garage.

“I heard a loud noise. It sounded like the door blew open. Then I saw smoke. At first, I thought I was seeing things,” Tyler said. “I yelled, ‘Fire,’ and nobody came down. Then I yelled, ‘Fire’ again.”

When his parents heard his first shout, both looked outside figuring that’s where the fire was.

“Then, he yelled again with panic in his voice,” said Mrs. Kraus, who stepped outside the

bedroom and saw smoke in the kitchen.

Mr. Kraus also noticed the panic in his son's voice and ran to him.

He quickly ushered the three children to safety. In the time it took her to get a bathrobe, smoke was coming up the stairway of the tri-level house, Mrs. Kraus said.

She called to their two 8-year-old female dogs, who are siblings, but they wouldn't come. By then, the smoke alarms were going off and may have frightened the dogs, she said.

The family ran next door to Mrs. Kraus' sister and brother-in-law Jody and Tom Kaat, where they called 911 to report the fire.

When Mr. Kraus knew everyone was safe, he went back to the house, opened the patio doors and called to the dogs again, but they didn't come.

Firefighters arrived quickly, but the few minutes seemed much longer, Mrs. Kraus said.

"The firefighters were like a well-oiled machine," she said. "They did a fantastic job."

Firefighters from Cedar Grove, Belgium, Port Washington, Fredonia, Waubeka, Saukville, Oostburg, Random Lake, Silver Creek, Town of Wilson, Waldo, Adell, Kohler and town and city of Sheboygan Falls were at the scene.

Firefighters saw the dogs occasionally while fighting the blaze, but were unable to get them out.

When the fire was out, Cedar Grove Fire Chief Greg Navis suggested the parents take the children away figuring they would be finding the dogs' bodies soon.

Instead, Rocket, who had been in the smoke-filled house for two hours, was found alive in the laundry room huddled between the washer and dryer. She was taken to the Cedar Grove Veterinary Clinic, where veterinarian Ron Hinze administered oxygen.

Three hours later, firefighters found Jett under a piece of wet wallboard that had fallen in a bedroom. They thought the dog was dead until she lifted her head.

The dogs are still at the clinic, where they share a kennel with a bedroom vaporizer to help them breathe. The family visits the dogs every day, and each day they see improvement. The dogs' eyes, which had been nearly closed and cloudy, are now clear and bright and both have their barks back.

The dogs still cough occasionally, but nothing like initially when they were coughing up black phlegm, Mr. Kraus said.

The dogs may be reunited with the family this week.

“We’re definitely blessed,” Mrs. Kraus said Tuesday, standing near the spot where the house used to be. “When you think of what it could have been. Now, it’s a little overwhelming, but we’re going to be OK.

“We have good insurance, we both have jobs and we have good families and friends.”

The family is staying with Mrs. Kraus’ parents Mary and Larry Prinsen on Palmer Road.

Both parents said they are amazed at how well their children are handling the situation.

The only time the children appeared distraught was when the family went to look at one of several places that have been offered for them to live in while their house is being rebuilt.

“Brody started crying, ‘I don’t want to live here,’” Mr. Kraus said. “He wanted to stay with Grandma and Grandpa. We talked to Tyler and Abby, and they both wanted to live with Grandma and Grandpa.”

So that’s where they will continue to live until they can move into the new house that will be built.

Instead of a tri-level, this house will be on one floor to serve as their retirement home, Mrs. Kraus said.

The children’s baby books and most of their pictures and home videos were recovered, but everything else was lost, including their two vehicles, a 1999 Ford pickup and a 2005 Ford Freestyle crossover wagon.

The next day, Ernie Von Schledorn gave them two vehicles to use.

Lots of friends showed up to help demolish what was left of the house after the Sheboygan County fire investigation team was finished.

Now, only the foundation, a deck, swimming pool and basketball court with two hoops remain.

Mrs. Kraus said it’s easier for her to go to the site now that the house is gone, but it’s harder for her husband, who helped build the house.

The children are unperturbed about the toys they lost.

“We’re an athletic family,” Mrs. Kraus said. “Give them a ball and they’re happy.”

Mr. Kraus, who works for the Ozaukee County Highway Department, is a coach for the seventh-grade Bronco’s youth football team and also coaches Rockets Recreation youth baseball.

Tyler plays football, baseball and basketball. Abby plays soccer, baseball and basketball, and Brody will play baseball next year. His father will be his coach.

Brody also loves to fish and a friend gave him a fishing pole to replace the one he lost in the fire.

Friends and strangers have donated clothes, meals and gift cards, Mrs. Kraus said.

The local Veterans of Foreign Wars branch took her shopping to buy clothes and shoes for everyone.

The list of donations goes on, the couple said.

“We’re so lucky,” Mrs. Kraus said. “We’re so fortunate to live in a community like this.”

Image Information: STANDING where their house used to be were Carrie and Kurt Kraus and their children, Tyler, 12, Brody, 6, and Abby, 10. A 10:15 p.m. fire Thursday, July 5, that started in the attached garage destroyed the house on Highway KW in the Town of Holland. Tyler noticed the fire first and alerted his family so they all got out safely. Photo by Sam Arendt