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Wednesday, 11 July 2012 18:25

Port officers praised after running into burning house to rescue sleeping resident

Port Washington Police Officer Jerry Nye and Reserve Officer Michael Kolbach are being hailed as heroes for running into a burning house and rescuing a 21-year-old man who was sleeping in the basement early Sunday morning.

“I almost want to deputize you for your efforts,” Fire Chief Mark Mitchell told the officers during Monday’s Police and Fire Commission meeting. “It’s huge to see that kind of bravery.”

The man, Justin Kriegel, and his English springer spaniel Chelsea were rescued from the house at 230 Douglas St., but the family cat, Valley, didn’t survive, homeowner Tim Benson said Tuesday.

“The police officers and fire department guys are all awesome,” Benson said. “What we lost are material things. Everyone’s safe. We’re all doing well right now.”

Benson also called his neighbor Carol Beck a hero.

It was Beck who first saw sparks coming from the house about 1:35 a.m. Sunday and called police, Mitchell said. Nye and Kolbach arrived on the scene minutes later.

“They just started pounding on the door,” Police Chief Kevin Hingiss said. “They yelled and pounded and the door popped open.”

The officers searched the first floor, then found their way to the basement, where Kriegel was sleeping in a recreation room. They helped Kriegel, who walks with a cane, out of the house, stopping to grab the dog along the way, Hingiss said.

Once outside, Kriegel told the officers the family cat was inside the house, but the smoke was so thick they couldn’t get back to search for the pet, he said.

“When they went in, the smoke wasn’t bad, but when they left, it was pretty bad,” Mitchell said. “Without any concern for their own safety, they (the officers) entered the home. An initial negative search and increasing smoke conditions would have forced most people out of the building. Not so with officers Nye and Kolbach.

“In my opinion, if it were not for the heroic act by officers Nye and Kolbach, the subject they rescued would have most surely suffered severe, if not fatal, injuries.”

Mitchell, who arrived at the scene a few minutes after the officers, said the breezeway of the house was fully involved and the blaze was working its way into the garage and up a wall to the second floor of the house.

Because of the heat, Mitchell said, he immediately called the Saukville and Grafton fire departments to the scene and asked Belgium to cover for Port at the fire station.

The bulk of the fire was out within five minutes, he said, but due to the amount of cleanup work after he called for additional help from the Fredonia, Cedarburg and Belgium departments. The Waubeka and Thiensville departments stood by at the fire house.

The Port department was at the scene until about 5:10 a.m., Mitchell said.

Benson said he and his fiance Tina Kriegel, Justin's mother, had gone out to dinner Saturday night and were shooting pool at Sundance when a police officer arrived at the bar.

"He said, 'Your house is on fire,'" Benson said. They ran out the door and hurried home, but he said their hearts sank as they turned the corner onto Douglas Street.

"As soon as we turned the corner we could see it," he said. "The flames were like 30 feet in the air."

Their first thoughts were for Justin, Benson said, adding they were relieved to find him unharmed.

Benson's 15-year-old son Kyle, who also lives in the home, was in northern Wisconsin at the time, he said.

After the fire was extinguished, firefighters took Benson through the house.

"That was hard," he said, noting he has lived in the home for about 17 years, and built much of the cabinetry inside.

The couple was able to salvage some clothing, a number of pictures and Tina's great-grandmother's china, he said.

But the house is likely a complete loss, Benson said. Insurance officials estimate it will be at least November before the house is rebuilt and the family can move back in.

The reality of what happened is still sinking in, Benson said.

"You don't know how much you have until you have nothing," he said, laughing as he talked about how the family purchased a few groceries but then realized they had no knife with which to cut the cheese they bought.

The family is staying at the Baymont hotel in Grafton while seeking an apartment to live in until the house is rebuilt, Benson said.

Mitchell said firefighters believe the blaze started in the breezeway. The cause, he said, was likely electrical.

But Benson said the insurance company's inspectors told him the fire probably started on the deck and worked its way into the breezeway. The cause, he said, is unknown.

There were smoke detectors in the house, but Mitchell said they were not going off when firefighters and police arrived.

That surprised Benson, who said there was one in a first-floor hallway and one in the basement. The smoke hadn't gotten downstairs when police arrived, he noted.

"I can't believe that one (on the first floor) wouldn't go off," he said. "Believe me, my next house, when it's done, is going to have smoke detectors all over."

PORT WASHINGTON POLICE Reserve Officer Michael Kolbach (left) and Officer Jerry Nye are being hailed as heroes for rescuing a 21-year-old man from a burning house on Douglas Street early Sunday morning. The house and attached garage were largely destroyed in the fire. Photo by Sam Arendt