

House fire in Detroit suburb kills three in multi-generation home

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A fire broke out the early morning hours of October 2 in a house in Oak Park, Michigan, a working class suburb of Detroit, resulting in the deaths of the three oldest adults living in the small brick home. In all, eight people resided in the house.

The exact cause of the fire, reported at 1:30am, is still under investigation. Lt. Michael Pemberton of the Oak Park Fire Department told the media the fire was apparently an accident related to the kitchen stove.

After desperate attempts to put out the fire and save the victims, firefighters found Eumpsey Knott, 81 and Lois Knott, 64, as well as their son, Odier Knott, 35, on the ground floor of the home. All three died.

Another daughter, Faydra Smith, 34, was rushed to the hospital and is in critical condition. She suffered smoke inhalation and burns, and was reported to have had a heart attack as a result of the fire.

The only family members in the house to survive the fire unhurt were Smith's three children, aged 14, 13 and 6. They were in the basement when the fire took place and escaped by climbing out of a basement window.

"I saved my brother and sister," John Smith, 14, told the media. John said he had fallen asleep while watching a movie, smelled the smoke and got his siblings out of the house.

The eighth member of the family, Erica Knott, 29, was not at home at the time of the fire.

Lynn Rosenthal, who lives next door, saw the blaze and shielded the 6-year-old who was barefoot and cold.

"The kids are changed forever. They will never forget this," Rosenthal explained to the *Detroit News*. "There is no way they could have made it out of there without those windows. It was a miracle."

The house burned so intensely the fire totally consumed the kitchen and the back porch.

"It's a terrible thing. They were such a nice family," Laurie Stern, who lives across the street, told the WSWs.

"All of our houses are alike in this area. They are not that big. The whole thing is so upsetting."

Stern believed the family had moved into the house two years earlier. She was not entirely sure, but she thought they were either renting or leasing the home. News reports confirmed that they were renting.

"We would often see the little girl playing in front of the house," stated Stern. "She was so cute. And the son was very athletic. You would see him running down the street."

When asked how so many people could live in such a small home, Stern remarked that she wasn't sure because the family did not mingle that much with neighbors. However, she said that all of the houses in the neighborhood were similar with less than 1,000 square feet, including two small bedrooms. "I'm not sure how they did it," she said.

The house, on the 15100 block of Northfield Boulevard, is typical of neighborhoods in Oak Park. Just north of Detroit, the city is one of the most integrated areas in the metropolitan area, with a nearly equal number of black and white families, including a large Orthodox Jewish community.

This city of 30,000, like many other municipalities in the Detroit metropolitan area, has its share of unemployment, poverty and attendant ills. Oak Park is the third most densely populated city in Michigan.

Tony Knott, 43, a family member, explained some of the social pressures confronting his family. He told the *Detroit News* that Eumpsey Knott was a retired GM worker who was quiet and very private. He added that Lois Knott had suffered a leg amputation and was being cared for by the oldest son, Odier. He also indicated that Faydra, with three children, moved in with her parents because she was unemployed. Before moving to Oak Park, the family had lived in northwest Detroit.

The Smith children told neighbors who helped them after the fire that they had recently given their grandparents the bedrooms on the ground floor; the latter had previously been living in the basement. The pooling of limited resources to take care of small children, working age adults without jobs and retired people with medical needs all under one roof is a throwback to the conditions of an earlier age when such conditions were common.

The phenomena of multi-generation households and “doubling up”—children over 18 years old living with their parents—have grown in the last thirty years and taken a further upswing since the crash of 2008.

According to a new survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (“Fighting Poverty in a Bad Economy, Americans Move in with Relatives”), the largest increase in the number of Americans living in multi-generational households in modern history has occurred in the last three years.

The report notes that in 2009 51.4 million Americans were living in multi-generational households, a jump from 46.5 million in 2007. More than one in six people

in the US are living in such households, or 16.7 percent.

From 32 million people living in multi-generational families at the end of the Depression in 1940 (24.2 percent of Americans), when the US population was 132 million, the total living in such arrangements had declined to 28 million (or 12.3 percent) by 1980—out of a population of 227 million. The trend then began to reverse and by 1990, some 35 million Americans were living in multi-generational families (14.1 percent), and by 2000 the number had reached more than 42 million (15 percent).

The report links the recent change to the Great Recession that began three years ago.

“The current surge in multi-generational households is linked to the economy,” states the Executive Summary. “The unemployed, whose numbers are growing, are much more likely to live in multi-generational households—25.4 percent did in 2009 compared with 15.7 percent with jobs,” says the report.

Metropolitan Detroit and the state of Michigan have some of the highest levels of unemployment and poverty in the US. The official unemployment rate in Detroit is presently 29 percent. Counting the underemployed, the actual rate is closer to 50 percent. Michigan’s official unemployment rate is 11.2 percent. To cope with these deplorable conditions, families have been moving in together in record numbers.

While the Pew report points to an average household increase from 2.4 people to 4.2, the Knotts’ home in Oak Park had eight members of the family under one roof, a trend not at all uncommon in the Detroit area.



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