

Kentucky house fire kills seven

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11 March 2013

A young couple and five small children died in a house fire in southeastern Kentucky Saturday morning. State police have not released information about the cause of the fire, but said it was accidental. All of the victims died of smoke inhalation.

Family members at the scene of the blaze identified the adults as Nina Asher, 22, and her boyfriend Jesse Disney, who was in his mid-twenties. The others were Asher's three children, three-year-old William, two-year-old Camden, and 10-month-old Abigail, along with two other toddlers who were at the house for a slumber party. Through tears, the father of Asher's children told the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, "They were the best kids in the world."

The family lived in a small neighborhood in the town of Gray, in Knox County, surrounded by relatives. Jesse Disney's parents live in another house just behind the small wood and brick ranch-style house. The couple and children had been up late for the sleepover and were sleeping at the time the fire started.

When the fire broke out, relatives rushed to the house to try to save the family. Ray Disney, Jesse's uncle, said they found Asher lying just inside. Gino Cima, another uncle, said, "When I opened the screen door, she was laying at the door with her head to the door. And I pulled her out."

Cima told the press, "And about two feet from her laying the other way was [Jesse]. And I went in and got him and pulled him out. But they was done gone. There wasn't nothing I could do."

Ray Disney said it appeared his nephew had attempted to rescue the children but was overcome by smoke. Cima raced to the front of the house to get to the children. But the flames were too much; firefighters had to retrieve the bodies.

"And that's when they had the five babies laying out in the front yard," Cima said.

According to emergency responders, someone placed

a 911 call at 9:57 a.m., and firefighters worked on the blaze until 1 p.m. Photographs of the home indicate that half of it was totally consumed by flames.

Asher was three months' pregnant. The couple had been fixing the house up in anticipation of the new baby, and had just cleaned the carpets the day before the fire. "It was a beautiful little family," Maria Disney, Jesse's aunt, told the *Herald-Leader*.

According to the paper, "Jesse Disney had had a hip replaced as a child and was on disability, but he helped his father a great deal, working in the garden and helping him build guitars."

Relatives told the Associated Press that the couple was devoted to the children, with "their lives organized around bedtime and bath time." The family was seen regularly strolling with a toy wagon or playing hide-and-seek in the close-knit neighborhood, referred to locally as "Disneyland."

"Everybody is very heartbroken over it. Everybody knows the Disney family," said a clerk at the convenience store where they often bought candy and milk. "They're always good to everybody."

The clerk put a jar on the counter seeking donations to help pay for funeral expenses. The AP noted, "It had four one dollar bills in it Sunday morning."

Knox County is a poor coal mining area. Per capita income is less than \$14,700, and more than one in three residents live below the poverty line. The county has an official unemployment rate of 11.2 percent. This figure greatly understates the depth of the jobless crisis; according the Census Bureau, of the county's population of 31,800, only 7,100 are employed.

The fire is the second such tragedy in eastern Kentucky this year. On January 9, a Pike County father and his four children were killed in a house fire as they slept. All five had been huddled around a space heater, which overheated. (See "House fires kill 11 in US south")

Those living in poverty are most vulnerable to fires because they are much more likely to live in substandard housing, such as trailers or old, wood-frame homes. They are also more likely to use unsafe heating methods such as electric or kerosene space heaters. Faulty or aged electrical wiring, lack of smoke detectors, and lack of exit routes frequently play a role in fatal fires.

In 2011, the most recent year recorded by the National Fire Protection Association, there were 1,389,500 fires reported across the US, causing more than 3,000 deaths and 17,500 injuries that year. Tens of thousands are rendered homeless, lose their belongings and pets.

In the past week, house fires claimed the lives of at least 11 other people around the country, including four children.



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