Funeral held for eight-year old Rochester, New York boy killed in trailer fire

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31 January 2014

Hundreds attended the funeral for an eight-year old boy on Wednesday who perished in a fire outside of Rochester, New York while attempting to save his handicapped grandfather. It is believed that the boy, Tyler J. Doohan, was killed while trying to reach his grandfather, Steven D. Smith 54, who used a wheelchair after losing part of one leg due to diabetes. Also killed in the fire was the owner of the trailer and Doohan's step-great-grandfather, Louis J. Beach, 57.

The young boy was staying with his grandfather during the Martin Luther King Jr. Day Holiday in a single, wide trailer home in the suburb of Penfield along with eight other people when the fire broke out in the early morning. After the fire ignited, Tyler woke six other residents of the home, including two other children, allowing them to escape the rapidly expanding fire with only minor injuries. After fleeing the home, survivors and neighbors witnessed Tyler run back into the trailer to rescue his grandfather and Beach. Tyler's body was found on a bed along with his grandfather's in the back of the trailer.

The tragic story has gained national and international media attention. Two online fund campaigns have succeeded in raising over $57,000 for Tyler's mother, Crystal Vrooman. However, while the national and international media outlets have used Tyler's heroic actions and subsequent death to pull the heart-strings of their audiences, they have largely remained silent on the shameful social conditions which caused the entirely preventable fire in the first place.

Neighbors report that the trailer home, which was located in the East Avenue Manufactured Home Community just outside Rochester, had fallen into disrepair as Tyler's grandfather, owner Louis Beach, was unable to afford repairs and maintenance. Beach, whose neighbors report was friendly and always willing help others in the community, was also known for letting friends and relatives stay in the home when they needed a place to stay. One neighbor reported that one of Beach's other adult grandchildren and boyfriend had started living there recently until they “got back on their feet.”

In addition, during the bitterly cold winter months in Upstate New York the trailer lacked gas heating, forcing the family to heat the trailer with as many as eight electric space heaters at a time. It is believed an electrical issue with one of the space heaters caused a blanket covering one of Tyler's cousins to ignite. The home also did not contain a fire alarm.

After the fire, the Penfield Fire Department reported an increase in trailer fires in the past year as more people turn to space heaters to heat their homes during cold spells. In recent years, the United States has become the world's largest importer of electric space heaters as gas utility costs rise and people struggle to heat their homes. The large majority of electric space heaters are produced for export in factories in China.

Electric space heaters are many times more dangerous than central gas heating and are prone to sparking fires due to overloaded circuits, damaged wires or defective construction. Trailers, like the one Tyler was staying in, are also at the same time poorly insulated and highly flammable due to their tight metal box-like construction, making them highly susceptible to rapidly spreading fires.

Prior to his death, Tyler had lived a transient life, like many children living in poverty, often changing school districts and bouncing from home to home with his mother or staying with relatives. According to a recently released report by the Rochester Area Community Foundation, Rochester is home to the fifth-highest level of child poverty in the United States,

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surpassed only by Detroit, MI, Hartford, CT, Cleveland, OH and Dayton, OH. In the greater Rochester region, which includes six surrounding counties, 19 percent of children live in poverty.

While poverty in the region is often spoken of as an issue unique to Rochester's inner-city, the study also showed that over 40 percent of the region's children in poverty reside in the suburbs. Penfield, NY, where the fire took place, is often stereotyped as a “wealthy” suburb free from poverty and homelessness. However, these same suburbs are dotted with areas with people living in manufactured home communities alongside major roadways similar to one where Tyler was killed.

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