

Kentucky row house fire kills five, including three children

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On October 20, an early morning fire engulfed a section of 175-year-old row houses in Maysville, Kentucky, killing a mother, her three children, and an elderly neighbor.

Police identified the victims as 35-year-old Lori Doppelheuer; 10-year-old Christopher Kearney; Eagan Hargis, 3; Kieran Hargis, 1; and Larry Brickels, 68, who died of burns at the hospital. Three others were injured in the blaze, and 30 residents have been displaced.

The fire broke out around 1 a.m. in the West Second Street neighborhood of Maysville, a small Ohio River city in northeastern Kentucky.

Officials have not determined the cause of the fire, but said it was likely accidental, and that Lori Doppelheuer's upstairs apartment had no working smoke detectors.

The father of the family, whose name has not been released as of this writing, was able to save two other children and escape with injuries. Witnesses told local television crews that the father and mother re-entered the house several times trying to rescue their children.

Neighbors awoke to the sound of screaming in the street, and smoke billowing into their own apartments.

The brick row houses, built in the 1840s, erupted in flames that took 40 firefighters an hour and a half to extinguish. Five buildings were damaged, and at least three will be demolished.

Some of the buildings on the block, reportedly in the process of renovation, are visibly dilapidated and had known safety problems, including doors that had to be unlocked with a key even from the inside.

The father of the children told WLWT News 5 that as he and Doppelheuer frantically sought to retrieve the remaining children after carrying their two daughters down, they struggled with the door. He opened the door

and handed the key to his wife just before the entryway was engulfed.

"We were saying, 'God, no, God, no,' and I knew she wasn't coming back out," said neighbor Ruth Austen. Doppelheuer was found in a back bedroom with the remaining three children. "It was very evident that they were trying to get out," Maysville Fire Chief Kevin Doyle said.

Early reports suggest the fire originated in an enclosed back porch, which was connected to the buildings on either side of Doppelheuer's residence. The fire quickly grew and shot through attics into neighboring apartments, Doyle told the press. Aerial footage of the buildings shows collapsed roofs and total destruction of the rear of the apartment.

Noting that the buildings originally housed cotton mill workers before the Civil War, Doyle told the media that the structures were like a "pile of kindling," and that development on them over the years had contributed to their flammability.

"These buildings were originally built with a firewall between them," he stated, "but as they add onto them over the years, that can result in opening up of those firewalls."

"I'm not sure that had any impact with what happened to the victims," he added, "but I can tell you it contributed to the fire's growth."

Upon arriving at the building, firefighters were unable to get farther than halfway up the stairs due to the intensity of the flames. They attempted to enter through a second-floor window, but the roof began to collapse. "And we knew that there was no survivable space in the rear of that portion, which is where the victims ended up being," Doyle said.

Nationally, the overall fire death rate has declined over the past decades. However, federal Fire

Administration statistics indicate that the vast majority of deaths (83 percent) occur in residential buildings. Annually, some 373,000 residential fires claim an average of 2,530 people, injure another 13,125, and cause \$7 billion in property damage.

As temperatures dip near freezing, residential fires tick up. Among low-income families—who are more likely to live in substandard or very old housing and often use electric space heaters, kerosene, and other unsafe methods of heating their homes—the risk of fire increases substantially.

In the past few weeks, Kentucky has already seen several other devastating residential fires.

- On October 18, a 60-year-old Lexington woman on an oxygen tank was killed after her house caught fire.

- In the early morning of October 15, three brick buildings caught fire in the Highlands neighborhood of Louisville. Some 70 firefighters were called in to battle the flames. Like the Maysville fire, the proximity, patchwork remodeling, and age of the buildings were a factor in the intensity of the blaze.

“Any time you’re dealing with this type of incident,” Louisville Fire & Rescue Captain Sal Melendez told WDRB News, “as far as so many structures so close together, and even those structures being divided up and sectioned off, it poses an even greater challenge than any typical structure fire.”

- On October 10, 14 families were displaced after a fire ripped through the River’s Breeze apartment complex in Ludlow, Kentucky.

- A September 25 house fire claimed the life of 54-year-old Selena Baker, of Louisville. “When I saw the fire, I said, ‘Lord have mercy on her,’” a next-door neighbor told local news. The home had smoke detectors, but they did not appear to work, fire crews told local news station WLKY.

- On September 12, two children were killed in a mobile home fire in Owenton. The trailer was an aluminum-sided, older unit in a mobile home park, which witnesses and firefighters said was too hot to enter just minutes after catching fire. The home had no working smoke detectors. The children, ages 2 and 4, were sisters; family set up an online fundraising account to pay for funeral expenses.

- A September 7 fire consumed a block of downtown Paintsville. Starting in a bowling alley, according to WSAZ News, the flames “quickly spread to adjacent

businesses and an apartment complex in the 600 block of Broadway Street.” Firefighters, including volunteer crews from four other towns, fought the blaze; some had to be treated for heat exhaustion at the scene.

Some of the families that have been put out by the fire were also displaced by the July floods that ravaged Johnson County. “Everything that I own is a loss,” said one resident. “My money. My purse. I have nothing but what I walked out with.”

- On September 1, dozens of residents were displaced after a huge fire in a century-old block of downtown Hazard. They were unable to save many personal belongings before having to evacuate, and are dependent on churches for charity. “My car keys were even in the apartment,” one resident told WKYT. “I can’t even take off in my car. I’m lost for words. I don’t know where to go or where to start.”



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