

Hundreds attend vigil for victims of Youngstown, Ohio house fire

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Several hundred people attended a Saturday evening vigil for the five children who died after an inferno engulfed their Youngstown, Ohio home last Sunday night.

Residents from throughout the Youngstown area attend the vigil, including many neighbors, entire families and others who knew the children and their family.

Those killed in the fire were 9-year-old Aleysa Rosario, 3-year-old Charles Gunn, 2-year-old Ly'Asia Gunn and one-year old twins Brianna and Arianna Negron.

The children's mother, 26-year-old America "Amy" Negron-Acevedo, was released from the hospital Thursday. She had suffered severe burns, smoke inhalation and other injuries in the fire. She had been placed under a medically induced coma, often done to treat burn victims, and did not learn of her children's death until after she had recovered enough to be taken off of the pain medication.

Originally planned to be held outside the house at 434 Parkcliffe Avenue, the vigil was moved to inside a church across the street from the home because of the heavy cold rain that was falling all day long. The extended family of the children attended the vigil and sat in the front rows of the church. Negron-Acevedo, who is still recovering, did not attend.

Aleysa's teacher, Courty Angello, spoke at the vigil, describing the girl as one of the most loving children. "She would come into class each morning and hug me and hug me at the end of each day."

After the vigil, standing with Aleysa's best friend Nahjae, 9, and fellow teachers, Angello told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Aleysa would also check on all the other children. "During recess and lunch, she would go around and make sure everyone was doing OK. She

had lots of friends.

"I came to offer my condolences to the family. I am going to always let people know about how wonderful she was so that she is not forgotten."

A GoFundMe page set up by Negron-Acevedo's nephew Edgar Daniel Negron to raise money to cover funeral costs describes the children:

"Aleysa Was 9 years old she loved to dance sing and make musically, Charles was 3 years old he had the attitude of a 10 year old he was so smart so bright and so energetic he always helped everyone and did everything. Ly'Asia 2 years old just got recently potty trained she is a very beautiful bright little girl she is sweet shy and loving Brionna & Arianna 1 years old were two beautiful twins they didn't get to see life to the fullest they were just learning to walk and do more things"

Russ Barton, a postal worker who delivered mail to the house along his route, attended the vigil and said he saw the older children playing outside during the summer: "They would be playing outside, the oldest one and the little boy. They were so polite, when they saw me coming, they would always say, 'Hey, Mr. Postman, how are you today.' This really hits home what happened."

City and fire officials have not released a cause for the fire, which broke out around 11:30 p.m. Sunday night and quickly engulfed the two-story wood frame home. The neighborhood is in a working-class section of the city, dotted with one- and two-story mostly wood-frame but also brick homes, which families work hard to maintain.

Acevedo-Negron is employed at a plastic container factory 20 miles south of the city and is studying to become a nurse. Even if working full time, she and her family, like millions of workers in America, would be

living well below the poverty line.

Lisa Bokesch and her daughter Erin, who live nearby but didn't know the family, attended the vigil to express their support. "It is just horrible what happened. Just to think of those five children. It is just terrible, it could have happened to anyone.

"Everyone in Youngstown is struggling. I work for one of the highest paying jobs here. I make \$11 an hour, it is very hard work and people are trying to get in. It is very hard being a single mother. Many are having to work two jobs to make ends meet. It is hard to decide to pay your bills and put food on your table."

Bokesch drew a connection between the social conditions that contributed to the fire and the four decades of deindustrialization that have had a devastating impact on the working class in the area. Last month, GM announced that it was closing its Lordstown Assembly plant, just 17 miles west of Negron-Acevedo's house, along with plants in Detroit, Michigan, and Oshawa, Ontario.

"I've lived here 53 years, I've seen the mills close. It used to be that a person could make enough to support themselves and their family. Now Lordstown is being closed down.

"I don't know what happened in this fire, but the landlords and Section 8 have to be held accountable. There is a real shortage of affordable housing and many people are living in places that might not be safe.

"Now we have the opioid crisis, people are dying and people don't feel safe. it is like an onion, just layers of issues that people are dealing with.

"The struggle is real."

Erin pointed out that young people have a very hard time in Youngstown. "I'm going to community college now and you can't find a job around here. There is no future, people go to school, but there needs to be jobs for them. Crime is going up and you don't feel safe."

In addition to the five children that died in Youngstown, 35 other people were victims of home fires throughout the United States this week, including five people killed in Pennsylvania, four people in Texas and three each in Michigan and New York.

So far this year 2,205 people have been killed in fires. This is just the beginning of the winter fire season. In the five months from Nov 1, 2017 to April 1 nearly 1,500 people were killed in house fires—mostly in working class and poorer neighborhoods as people are

forced to turn to space heaters in substandard housing.

Karen Mackley, who works at a nearby nursing home said that she believed the landlord and the government should be held accountable for the fire.

"I think this is terrible and responsibility falls upon the city and the landlord. This was a Section 8 house and the city and the housing department are supposed to make sure that they are safe. We need to know why that house wasn't safe for a family.

"They are letting many of the landlords get away with unsafe housing because they don't care. The landlords are from out of town and they buy up these houses and rent them out for unbelievable rents and they don't keep them up.

"There needs to be affordable and decent housing for people. There is a lack of work, Lordstown is now closing, not many people from here worked there, but that is going to leave even fewer jobs in the area."



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