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Fire victims grateful for community's help

By LINDA C. ALLARDICE

Special to the Herald News

WESTPORT --- Generosity is compassion put into action, and for one local family, tears, hugs and a multitude of thanks are the only way they can repay that generosity.

When fire destroyed the home of Joseph and Susan Cabral Aug. 28, the family was left with virtually nothing.

Gone was faithful Bruno, whose barking had awakened family members in time to escape the flames.

Gone were the pictures of Joseph and Susan's wedding day 14 years ago.

Gone was the Nintendo four sons had wrangled with so Mario could save Princess.

Gone was the first house the Cabral family owned.

"I've always been a compassionate person," said Joseph, whose job as an emergency medical technician with Norfolk Bristol Ambulance puts him in the middle of families in crisis everyday. "It's different to be on the other side."

"Usually (as an EMT) you work during the emergency, then it stops, then you go onto the next call. But this"... he says, looking at the charred shell that was once his home..."This will stay with me and not go away because it's mine."

Joseph recalls the early Wednesday morning he was at work when dispatch radioed him on the "hot phone" that his Crane Street home was on fire.

"I saw the black smoke as we approached Route 6. Me and Al (his partner on the ambulance) just looked at each other in silence. We knew what was going down"

What Joseph knew was that a blaze was consuming his house, unchecked. When a burning structure is being doused, the dark, thick smoke becomes white --- a sign that the fire is losing the struggle.

Susan's thought of that morning have since become a blur. She said she remembers hearing the dog and walking to see the house in flames. She knows she led sons Eric, 13, and Kiel, 5, safely outside.

Darlene Medeiros and Joseph Fernandes, neighbors braved the flames and smoke to rescue the Cabral's youngest boy, Kristopher, 3, who apparently lost hold of his mother's hand during the escape.

"I can remember running around outside screaming 'My baby! My baby!'," Susan says.

Nearly a month later, the family manages to live in a small mobile home provided by their insurance company. Looking out the back door, the burned home with its many memories still sits.

Because the final details with the

insurance company have not been settled, Joseph said he cannot knock down the old home or get on with building a new one.

Coping with the fire's aftermath is something each family member handles differently.

Son Joey, 9, was having a sleepover at his grandmother's house and was not home at the time of the fire. He lost his caged pet Whobeboo, in the blaze, but he has not lost his toothy smile.

Erik, keeping a stiff upper lip and managing all the manhood young adolescent can muster, said he's doing OK.

Kiel said he is looking forward to getting a new home, which he firmly believes will be delivered the day after Christmas and come with enough bedrooms so he can have his own.

Little Kristopher had no time to talk. He was too busy scouting out mischief. His wide open eyes and smile --- revealing a chipped, front tooth --- expressed the innocence of all three year olds. Two courageous neighbors' actions mean Kris will be able to give that chipped enamel to the tooth fairy someday; and for that Susan and Joseph say they are most thankful.

Susan has trouble dealing with the tragedy and chooses to escape it by going out in the car or taking long walks. "I don't like to be here." She gestures with her hand while sitting in her temporary kitchen.

"This doesn't feel like my house. I don't feel like I'm home."

While the family is eager to start life over again in the new home, it's hard for Joseph to say goodbye to the house he and his late father, Manuel, worked so hard on.

When Joseph and Susan bought the home in 1984, it was a mobile home. Joseph and his father, a craftsman, built the addition, added bedrooms, enlarged the kitchen and put a new deck on the home. Of the items lost in the fire, Joseph will miss the grandfather clock is grandfather carved.

"Heartbroken" is how Joseph feels at losing a home he and his father crafted together.

The Cabrals have enlisted the help of Joe Texteira and East Coast Homes in replacing their house. Joseph said he hopes to have all the financial details settled and the new home in place before it snows.

As the family continues to make plans to move forward, they offered their heartfelt thanks to family, friends and co-workers who helped make the past few weeks survivable. Donations of clothes, food and money poured in. A recent benefit dance, coordinated by fellow EMT Bob Radzik and his wife, Pam, collected some \$1,300.

Donations may still be sent to the Cabral Family Fund, which was set up by family friend at Crescent Credit Union, 835 Oak St., Brockton, Mass., 02401.

"When something like this happens, you don't realize you have so many friends," said Alice Cabral, Joseph's mother.

The family recently gathered to celebrate Joey's birthday. After all the presents and cards were opened, one present from an "anonymous" someone remained. Joseph said it was a gift for the whole family. As the four boys tour off the wrapping, screams of delight rang out.

A Nintendo.



Herald News Photo by DAVE SOUZA

Flames destroyed the Cabral Family's home Aug. 28. Relatives, friends and co-workers are helping the Westport family survive. From left are Susan, Joseph II, Kristopher, Joseph, Kiel (leaning on dad) and Eric.