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Gloucester Fire Kills Grandmother, Three Children

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Virginia - A fire so intense that it melted plastic fixtures on firetrucks 100 yards away killed three young children and their Army veteran grandmother early Wednesday morning. There was nothing that could have been done differently to affect what the outcome was in terms of how we responded; it's just tragic, said Gloucester County Fire Chief J.D. Clements of a roaring house fire that pulled together 13 trucks and more than 50 volunteer firefighters from two counties.

It was the county's first fatal fire since 2004, Clements said.

Debra Ann Jones was startled awake by the sirens at 2 a.m. as pumper trucks roared out of the Courthouse fire station near her home. Half an hour later, she learned that her daughter's home was on fire 2 miles away on mud-filled Summerville Drive. Three of her grandchildren and their paternal grandmother had died.

"I got there as fast as I could, and I saw a man in an ambulance and it was my daughter's father-in-law. I asked who the lady was, and somebody said it was my daughter," Jones recalled Wednesday.

The youngest of the three grandchildren, Gabriel, was born six months ago to the day Wednesday.

Jones said funeral arrangements were incomplete and that the family is confident that the rural Gloucester community will come to its aid to help defray funeral costs. "It's hard to even think about," she said.

In addition to Gabriel, family members identified the dead as the child's two brothers, Tommy, 7, and Michael, 2. Also deceased is Virginia Grogan, the children's paternal grandmother.

Jones said her daughter, Jessica, 31, one of seven people living in the home, was hospitalized with a broken ankle and was in shock.

"She may have jumped from the roof, but she was too much in shock to talk," Jones said.

Clements, the fire chief, said the paternal grandmother was apparently with the children in an upstairs bedroom and may have re-entered the home when the second floor collapsed from the flames.

He said the fire is believed to be accidental and may have started because of a faulty electrical outlet. The fire was fully engaged when firefighters arrived, and they were unable to immediately penetrate the heat.

Clements said it appears the fire roared to the upstairs by way of a prefabricated chimney. The fire is still under investigation, he said.

Also hospitalized was the grandfather, Donald F. Grogan, who purchased the home with his wife in 1988, according to court records.

Clements said the one-lane road was clogged with fire vehicles and personal cars as firefighters swarmed to the scene.

"Water supply was never a problem," he said. "We did everything we could. I'm proud of everyone's response."

Jones, though, was haunted by the eerie scene in the dark, drizzly night, especially as she watched the arrival of her son-in-law, Thomas Edward Grogan, 35, who works the night shift at a 7-Eleven store in Saluda.

"I saw him come in from the back over a fence trying to get to the house. It took five officers to stop him. It was just a horrible thing to watch," Jones said.

Grogan and his wife celebrated their ninth wedding anniversary Jan. 5.

All four grandparents are military veterans, Jones said. Her daughter, who's known as Shorty, and her son-in-law, Thomas, both worked for the convenience store in Saluda; one the night shift, one the day shift.

Just Sunday, Jones said she spent hours with the grandchildren and used the time to get new portraits done of the boisterous threesome.

"Tommy was just a character," Jones said. "He came up to me one time when he was just a little guy and slapped me right on the hind end. 'You're awesome; I just love you, grandma,' he said."

Wednesday, the gruesome fire scene was a hodgepodge of the charred ruins of a home, family cars, furniture, an abandoned aboveground swimming pool and a Christmastime creche scene, which somehow still projected an air of serenity.

Written by Richmond Times-Dispatch

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