

Fire Through My Heart

Written by Julie Powers

On August 19, 2001, my family experienced a horrible loss. My husband and I lost our two daughters to a house fire. Our daughters were 6 and 4. Our oldest would have attended her first day of first grade on the following day.

Fire awareness in the state of Illinois needs to improve. Children need to be educated, but not only children need this education, adults would benefit from fire awareness programs as well. What can we do as a community? What can we do as a state? Where do we start?

As a parent I used to think that a house fire would never happen to me. My family would always be safe. My children would always be well protected. My children have learned in school that you need a fire escape plan; they were taught that they should never play with fire. I helped to enforce that they shouldn't play with fire, that fire was dangerous. How much did I know, as a parent, about fire safety? At what age do we start to teach our children about fire safety? What do our children learn when they go on field trips to the fire station?

I went as a parent chaperone to the fire stations with my children and their groups. I saw the fire engines and met the brave men who put their lives on the line every time they step into a home that's on fire. These programs are great, but do they really teach a child how to be safe when a fire is in their home? There are large fire stations in Illinois that can afford programs that educate children on specific instructions on what they should do in case of a fire. Smaller communities that depend on their volunteer departments have other resources available to them, but how do we get the rural areas that are further away from the large cities, educated with the programs that are available? What do we do to educate the adults that should know how to protect their children?

I wish that I would have known what to do to prevent a fire from happening in my home. I continuously fight with myself when it comes to how much I could have done to protect my family. I lost two of the most precious little babies that could have ever been placed on this earth. My oldest daughter, Sariena, had only 6 years to experience her life with me. My youngest, Annie, was still a toddler at 4 years old. Both of these girls made an impact on every life they touched. Teachers would tell me what special little girls they were. I believe every parent loves to hear those comments. I certainly did, and I believed every one to be true! My little girls were not disobedient; they played together as if they were the best of friends. These two little girls were taught at an early age that all they had in this world were each other and me. They were products of a divorced family. We took care of each other. I never had to ask too much of my children, when I needed them to be good they were, when I needed them to help me, they did. I couldn't have asked for sweeter children. The Almighty couldn't have blessed me any other way.

The night I lost my babies was a horrific experience for me. I didn't hear them scream, I didn't hear them suffer. Instead I slept as they were silently taken from this world. Both girls were in the top bunk of their bed, and as the fire built itself, the smoke hovered over them engulfing their bodies. Their little lungs were drowned in smoke. Once the smoke reached the lower level of the house my husband and I were becoming victims of the fire as well. Not once were we aware that there was anything wrong. There

were no alarms, no irritating buzzers or beeping. There was no warning. There was only one smoke detector in the house we were renting. Our smoke detector did not work that night.

We went to bed during a rainstorm and the power had gone out several times. I had usually let my children sleep in our bed when storms like this were happening. My youngest was afraid of lightning, just as most youngsters are. My oldest told her little sister not to worry that they were big girls and they could sleep in their own beds and everything would be okay. It was common for me to check on the girls. I just didn't sleep well since I was remarried and they slept in a different room. So the last time I checked on them I had awakened them by accident. As I tucked them back into bed, both girls were now in the same bunk, I told them that everything would be okay and that I loved them.

Approximately one hour later our neighbor woke us by banging on our windows and doors. The first thing that came to my mind was "Who is this crazy man trying to break into our house?" We had only lived in this neighborhood for a little over a month and still had not unpacked everything. So, I was frightened at the commotion he was causing. When all of a sudden a chill sliced right through my heart when he screamed "Get out, your house is on fire!" I immediately ran for the stairs. I coughed and choked on the thick smoke that had already filled the air downstairs, as I made it to the stairs I found myself crawling on the floor trying to breathe what clean air there was. I held my breath and made it to the top of the stairs where the heat had made my face burn. My knees were feeling pain from the heat on the ground. I screamed for my children to come to my voice. I called for them to crawl to me. I couldn't breathe any longer and a feeling of emptiness filled my body, as I knew that my babies were not in that room, they were not there to hear me. They could not answer me, even if they really wanted to. I slid down the stairs so that I could get some air and try again.

My husband stayed at the foot of the stairs and as soon as I was out of the house he ran back in. He made it into the room, and attempted to enter the room to find the girls. The firemen had to escort him out of the house. He found me at the front of the house watching this fire take my entire life away from me. I had fallen on the grass in front of my neighbors' home and watched this blaze grow stronger and stronger and all I could do was beg and plead that someone save my babies.

Emergency Medical Technicians led my husband and I to an ambulance where they began to treat our wounds. At this time, I found out that my husband had second and third degree burns to his hands and face. I had burns on my knees. Moments later two men opened the doors of the ambulance and had asked how we were. I asked the older gentleman where my children were. He and the younger man with him had to do everything they could to keep my husband from bursting out of the ambulance. The older gentleman apologized and told us that the girls had not made it. They were sleeping when the smoke had filled their lungs, so they never felt the heat of the fire that surrounded their room. They helped me to the area where the firemen had laid these two small bodies. They were as hot as coals and all I could remember was that I had told myself that the angels rescued them long before the burns on their bodies were made.

It has been over one year, and the young men that were volunteers on this fire department have still not forgotten that morning they had to answer that call. My husband and I have worked with these men to strengthen the awareness that this too could happen

to anyone. The men worked together to furnish smoke detectors in homes that did not have them, or had ones that did not work at all. These men helped to spread the word that you should check your smoke detectors not only by testing the batteries, but also testing the alarms with smoke from blowing out a match or candle. My husband and I have survived our tragedy, and we may never have children of our own again. There are other options, however, only when we are ready.

For now, we want to educate our community and our state. We once thought “This will never happen to us” and now we say good morning to our daughters through prayer. What we wouldn’t give to have those beautiful and most precious babies alive and well again and go about our lives as nothing had happened. Our reality is that we can only help to make sure that this doesn’t happen to you. Parents and all adults need to be aware, become educated. Participate in fire awareness activities in your area. Find out what you need to do to protect your family from a tragedy such as ours. Go to your fire department and ask them to do a home inspection for you. There are several steps to fire prevention in your home, you should begin with something and you should begin today!