

Crystal Lake family of 9 displaced after explosion, fire destroy home

Prairie Ridge High School student describes harrowing escape

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CRYSTAL LAKE – Shirley Polk clutched the blanket draped over her shoulders as she watched flames ravage her home Tuesday.

A fire ripped through the Polk family home after an explosion about 6:30 a.m., displacing the family of nine who lived there. Family members said seven people were home at the time and able to escape before their home was reduced to a charred frame.

“Twenty-three years up in smoke,” Shirley Polk said from the street. “My husband’s urn, my mother’s China cabinet. Everything had a memory.”

Crystal Lake Fire Rescue District Chief Paul DeRaedt said firefighters were dispatched to the home at 6015 Blue Court after receiving a 911 call that the family was escaping and flames were showing from the basement, where it appeared the explosion occurred. He said by the time the first crews arrived, the home was fully engulfed.

More videos from the scene

John Polk, 17, said he was getting ready to go to Prairie Ridge High School when he smelled smoke. He said he thought it was someone burning leaves nearby, but then he saw dark smoke billowing from the basement and heard an explosion.

His brother and sister were thrown against a wall, and his mom, Shirley, was thrown against the stairs, he said. John Polk said he grabbed his little brother from upstairs and they fled from the home. Once outside, he said he realized his older brother, Joe, still was in the basement sleeping.

“I just grabbed the biggest rock I could and smashed the windows to get all the smoke out, and then I had to grab and pull him upstairs,” John Polk said.

Joe Polk was the only member of the family injured in the fire, the family said. He was taken to an area hospital with unknown injuries.

Two dogs died in the blaze, the family said.

Shirley Polk said she and her husband, Richard, who died six years ago, raised more than 20 foster kids in the home, adopting six of them. She said most recently nine people lived there, ranging from 2 to 64 years old.

PHOTOS: Firefighters battle Crystal Lake blaze

Firefighters from across McHenry County responded to the blaze. DeRaedt said because of the rural location there were no fire hydrants, and three tender trucks were called to haul water to the scene. Firefighters battled the fire from the ground and the air. They started sifting through the smoldering ashes about 8 a.m., but DeRaedt said the collapsed roof could alter how investigators responded.

Neighbors and friends also flocked to the home just off Crystal Lake Avenue. The Red Cross and members of the First Church in Crystal Lake volunteered to help the family.

People approached the family and offered shoes, blankets and clothes. One neighbor took off his jacket and handed it to Stephen Polk, 31, who was standing barefoot in the street with a blanket wrapped around his waist.

“I can’t take the coat off your back, man,” Stephen Polk said before giving in and pulling the navy blue jacket over himself.

Officials notified the state fire marshal. DeRaedt said it’s not clear what caused the fire, which caused about \$300,000 in damage.

How to help:

A friend of the Polk family started a GoFundMe page to raise \$10,000. To donate, visit <http://shawurl.com/28a6>.