

WASHINGTON AVENUE

Community mourns girl, grandmother killed in fire

BY ALYSSA BAJEK
 Staff Writer

"Little Ferry is a small town with a big heart. When someone is in need or someone is hurt we come together as a big family to assist," these words of Mayor Mauro Raguseo rang true as the community of Little Ferry came together to support the families of a tragic house fire last week, which claimed two lives.

On Tuesday, Aug. 16 an explosive fire erupted inside a Washington Avenue multi-family home, where nine people lived. Five-year-old Maribella Colon and her grandmother, Margaret Colon, 56, both lost their lives as a result of the fire.

Twelve people were injured or killed, including nine of the 12 residents of the home and three police officers who suffered minor injuries.

Residents jumped out of windows in order to escape the smoke, but some were injured in the process. Within the course of a day, the families had lost everything. Since the fire, friends, neighbors, and community members have rallied together to show their support. Little Ferry residents have placed balloons and toys outside the home in memory of Maribella and her grandmother. Local organizations got to work right away fundraising for the victims.

The Meadowlands Family Success Center has been taking donations of gift cards for the families affected by the fire. According to the Family Success Center director Jenira Hill, a number of new faces have come to the success center to donate. Hill said helping families in times of need is what the Family Success Center is there for.

"In regards to [assisting] the families, that's our mission. Doing work like this and getting people together; trying to be on the front-line. We only have each other,"

she said.

In addition to collecting gift cards, the Family Success Center decided to provide additional help through its pre-scheduled car wash, giving money raised to the families instead of the Police Athletics League, where funds were initially to be dedicated.

Other organizations are assisting as well. The American Red Cross Disaster Team is assisting families with temporary lodging, food, and clothing needs. "Red Cross volunteers remain available to the families for support, counseling and referrals to local agencies that may provide long-term assistance during their recovery," said the Red Cross in a press release.

The Bergen County United Way is assessing the needs of the families and has set up a tax deductible donation fund for them. The families will receive 100 percent of donations and donors will not be charged a processing fee.

According to Bergen County United Way President Tom Toronto, some of the services the organization will be assisting the families with will be providing them with housing needs, including security deposits and providing furniture, in addition to helping with funeral expenses.

Toronto said that as of Monday morning before the weekend intake had been tallied, the organization had taken in \$1,500 in online donations and received a check for \$1,000. He estimated that the total amount would be around \$2,500 to \$3,000. "It's been a pretty robust response," he said.

Residents have also created GoFundMe pages to raise money for the families. Thousands of dollars have been raised across two GoFundme page for the families over the course of just a couple of days. On Friday the GoFundMe for Maribella and Margaret's funeral cost had raised more than

\$6,000 of its \$15,000 goal and the GoFundMe page for the Lucero Family, who lived on the second floor of the home and lost all of their possessions in the fire, has also raised more than \$6,000 toward its \$10,000 goal.

Community members and officials extended their thanks to the first responders.

"I just want to say how grateful we are to the volunteers and police officers who responded that night," said Raguseo. "If it weren't for the police officers' quick action, and the firefighters' quick action more lives would have been lost. They acted quickly; they put their own lives at risk. It takes a special individual to do what is unnatural; most people would run away from danger. Firefighters, EMS, they run towards danger. We are incredibly grateful for our police officers, firefighters, and EMS."

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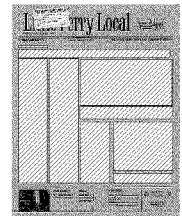
He added that he was thankful for the quick response and support from the emergency services of neighboring municipalities, who came to provide additional support for Little Ferry's emergency services.

Police Chief Ralph Verdi said he was grateful for the response of neighboring communities' emergency service workers. He said he got to the scene 10 minutes after his officers.

Three of his officers inhaled smoke from the flames and one twisted his ankle. However, all three are doing well, according to Verdi. On Friday, some of the officers were even healthy enough to report to patrol.

"The house was fully engulfed and they did the best they could," he said. Verdi praised the community for their efforts to help support the families.

Those interested in supporting the families affected by the fire may drop off gift cards from major retailers where food or clothing is available to the Meadowlands

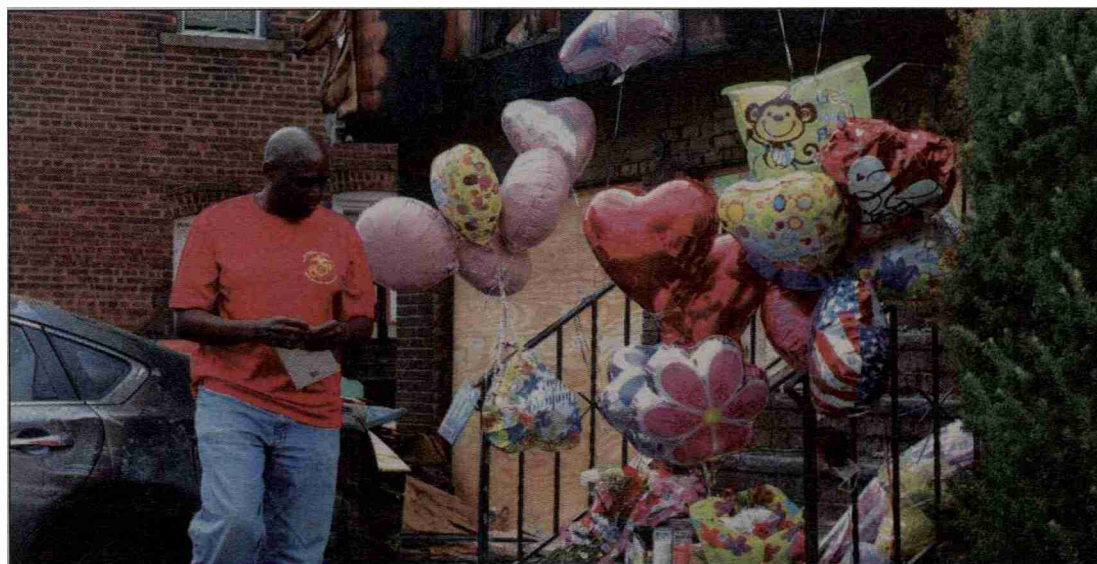


Family Success Center located at 100 Washington Ave. or make a monetary donation to the Bergen County United Way, by going to bergenunitedway.org and clicking on "Make a Donation."

Email: bajek@northjersey.com



Flowers, candles, stuffed toys and balloons were placed on the front steps where a 5-year-old girl and her grandmother died after a fire quickly spread through their multi-family house.



TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Stanley Billins, of Little Ferry, brings balloons and sympathy cards to the home on Washington Avenue. Billins said he had seen the young girl, who died in the fire, doing arts and crafts at the Meadowlands Family Success Center, where he is part of the community board, located across the street from the fire.