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CITY OF MUSCATINE PRESS RELEASE

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LOCAL MAN RECOGNIZED FOR ASSISTANCE AT FATAL FIRE

Fire that claimed three could have been four if not for the effort of Muscatine man

MUSCATINE, Iowa –Bibo Aguilar, a 21-year-old Muscatine man, was walking home from practice at the Muscatine County Boxing Club (MCBC) when he smelled something and investigated.

“That right there is something that needs to be recognized,” Mike Hartman, Assistant Fire Chief for the Muscatine Fire Department said. “There are just so many people that just wouldn’t care. He found the house, found the house on fire, and called 9-1-1 to report the fire.”

Hartman said that after listening to the 9-1-1 tape that it seems Aguilar and the dispatcher agreed to have Aguilar yell at the people in the house and tell them to get out however they can and however they could.

“He did open the screen door according to the video but he did not try to enter the house,” Tony Kies, Lieutenant of Investigations for the Muscatine Police Department said.

Aguilar did keep yelling at the people inside and one person was able to jump out of the window.

“Quite honestly, those actions right there are the reason that the gentleman is alive at this point,” Hartman said.

Hartman noted that the fire and police department do not want people running into houses that are that full of smoke and that hot, but the steps taken by Aguilar were heroic in their own way. If Aguilar had taken two steps into the house he would have either been a patient or a victim.

“I have no doubt, looking at the squad video and all the information that I can gather, he could probably do a couple of steps in, get a whiff of that smoke, and he would be either really hurt or a victim,” Hartman said.

The smoke was really dark and that provided Hartman with clues to the intensity of the fire. The color of the smoke can tell fire fighters and investigators what kind of things are inside the home including carbon, cyanide, carbon monoxide, and carbon dioxide.

“All the plastics, all the nasty stuff that gets put off when someone burns plastic was in that smoke,” Hartman said. “And that smoke was really hot. You can tell just by the way the smoke was being pushed out of the house, the pressure gradient there was because the temperature of the smoke was extremely high at that time.”

Officer Ben Varela was first on the scene and found Brian Wentz on the ground.

“Varela began to move Wentz away from the side of the house because it was hot and smoky,” Lt. Kies said. “A second officer, Alex Rink, tore down a portion of a fence to assist in the extraction and a third officer, Jolisa Coleman, helped move the victim to the ambulance and then went with him to the hospital.”

Police officers first on scene are trained to apprise the situation to see what they can do. While walking around they find the gentleman lying on the ground underneath a window. Officer Varela went over the fence and started taking care of the victim, Rink pulled down the fence, and together they pulled him out. Officer Coleman showed up about that time and helped move him to the ambulance.

“No matter what anyone could have done, I am 100 percent sure that nobody could have changed the outcome of what happened because the house was so heavily filled with smoke, and the heat and temperature so intense,” Lt. Kies said.

Both are looking forward to meeting with Aguilar and thanking him for his efforts and his part in saving Wentz.

“I am sure it seemed like a lifetime to Aguilar before emergency personnel arrived but Ben (Varela) was right around the corner,” Lt. Kies said. “He did everything he could possible do to help those inside ... he kept yelling and he kept telling them to get out.”

Hartman also said that what Aguilar did is in direct correlation to this gentleman being at the University hospital instead of someplace else.

The work by the Muscatine Police Department and the Muscatine Fire Department during this tragic fire was also recognized by Lt. Kies and Hartman.

Lt. Kies recalls a statement he heard that speaks volumes of the effort by fire fighters.

“I will never forget this,” Lt. Kies said. “I have never worked so hard to gain nothing. That is a powerful statement.”

There is no hesitation among the fire firefighters and no quit Hartman said. He also completed the efforts of the police officers who were first on the scene.

“Without their efforts, this tragedy would have been much worse,” Hartman said.

Critical Incident Debriefing

Whenever an intense experience occurs, such as a tragic fire, the sights and sounds and memories often have a long lasting effect. To help police officers and fire fighters with this experience, Muscatine brought in a Critical Incident Debriefing Team.

“We have used them before and it has worked well,” Hartman said. “It helps to talk about things in a group setting like that because what one person is experiencing another might have a perspective that can help.”

Hartman said this is something the department does, not on a regular basis, but when there is an abnormal, stressful situation. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing consists of sitting down as a group and just talking about what happened, in other words, debriefing the incident. If there are any questions that come up in this group setting, someone may be able to address the question or feeling.

“An example here is if I am on scene and I don’t step into the house to grab somebody and I talk about that in my debriefing, there is somebody else around who will say it is a good thing you didn’t,” Hartman said. “It kind of helps me process and that is what a lot of this is. It is just talking about what happened and having people with different views discuss it so that we can all kind of understand what happened.”

From a police perspective, Lt. Kies knows that when an officer arrives at a scene there are a lot questions they ask especially if they are not able to get inside to help people out.

“First thing you think is why were they here and not why didn’t they get out,” Lt. Kies said. “If they were so close what could I have done? There are all these other factors like the fire, or being disoriented because of the smoke, or because you really cannot smell smoke when you are sleeping. For one of the cops, who were right next door, why didn’t we know these things?”

Lt. Kies said that, as cops, you kind of lock that stuff away but this (the debriefing) was a good way to change that.

“Everybody deals with this stuff in their own way,” Hartman said. “Sitting down and discussing as a group helps. You have what’s in your head and what’s in your heart. You can’t change your heart but if we can help change what’s in your head, that helps you process and help yourself.”