

ON BIRTHDAY, FATHER FINDS FAMILY DEAD FIRE IN DETROIT HOME CLAIMS 6

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Friday, December 3, 1999

Author: SUZETTE HACKNEY FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

It was a sweet moment when Michael Anderson, on the eve of his 26th birthday, left for work late Wednesday afternoon.

He hugged and kissed his wife, his sweetheart since he was 16 and she was 14, then he affectionately slapped his boys on the head and told them to take care of their mother and sister.

As he walked out the door of the home on Detroit's northwest side, he said his daughter Nichelle ran up to him, said "Dada" and "poked her little lips out for a kiss."

He returned 12 hours later to a scene beyond nightmarish after having a celebratory birthday dinner with a friend after work. Firefighters would tell him that a fire began at about 3 a.m. Thursday and killed his wife, Monique, their three children, his mother-in-law and his grandmother-in-law.

"My family is gone," a tearful Michael Anderson said Thursday. "I tried to be the father that I never really had. I wanted my kids to have a mother and father in the house.

"I wanted to raise my kids my way, and give them a stable home, and teach them right from wrong. That's all I ever wanted to do."

The fire began after a space heater was left unattended and too close to a mattress in the basement, fire officials indicated.

Firefighters said three familiar safety hazards were key factors: the unattended space heater, security bars on the windows, and no basement smoke detectors.

So far this year, 47 children have died in Detroit home fires. In 1998, a record of 80 children died in residential fires.

Dead are **Bernice Maurant** , 65; Christine **Maurant** , 50; Monique Anderson, 23, and children Daniel **Maurant** , 10; Michael Anderson Jr., 6, and Nichelle Anderson, 2.

Five bodies were in the living room of the one-story home in the 9600 block of Strathmoor. One adult died in the kitchen, the only room where bars were not on the window, apparently trying to escape. All six died from smoke inhalation.

Fire officials said the fire probably smoldered at first, and that by the time the smoke detector upstairs came on, it was too late for the family to escape.

"Everyone needs to have more smoke detectors than you think you need -- put them in every room if you need to," said Detroit Arson Capt. Michael Markowski.

Firefighters urge special caution during cold weather when space heaters and other temporary means of keeping warm are often employed.

Michael and Monique Anderson and their children had only been in the house, owned by **Bernice Maurant**, about three weeks. The couple slept in the basement and used the space heater to stay warm.

Michael Anderson said he and his wife were buying a home nearby, and they were scheduled to close on it next Wednesday. Until then, **Bernice Maurant**, a retired nurse, welcomed the family.

"She was very giving and always willing to help," he said. "If you needed help and you went to her, she tried her best to help."

Anderson said his mother-in-law, Christine **Maurant**, was a nurse and treated her grandchildren like gold.

"She was a good woman and I loved that my children spent so much time with her," he said. "She wanted the best for them."

Anderson said he married Monique on Aug. 6, but they had dated for about 10 years.

At 16, he says, he was riding bikes with a buddy when he spotted Monique, then 14, walking to the library with a friend. He jumped off his bike and went to talk to her, drawn by her smile and good looks.

"She was it," he said. "She was everything I ever wanted in a wife."

Nearby residents in the quiet, working-class neighborhood were devastated Thursday. **Bernice Maurant** had lived in the house for about 25 years. The children often played outside and were described as smart, beautiful and well-mannered.

"This is so tragic," said neighbor Geraldine Cleveland, 63. "I just hate this. I cried all morning because of those babies."

Added next-door neighbor Karen Prall: "When I saw all the fire trucks, I just kept hoping that no one was in there. That's four generations who are gone -- it's just amazing that this happened."

FIRE SAFETY

In case of a fire in your home, the Detroit Fire Department recommends that you immediately alert everyone to get out before calling for help; stay low and crawl if there is a lot of smoke; stop, drop and roll if your clothing catches fire, and stay out of a burning building once you've escaped.

To improve your chances:

Install a smoke detector on each floor of your home and inspect them each month.

Have at least one multipurpose fire extinguisher.

Plan escape routes and meeting places once outside.

Repair electrical problems and resist overloading sockets.

Keep space heaters three feet from anything flammable.

The Detroit Fire Department discourages the use of portable kerosene space heaters and warns against leaving heaters on after going to bed or leaving the house.

The Detroit Fire Department has free smoke detectors available for low-income families. Call 313-596-2959 anytime. A firefighter will install the smoke detector, Chief Lee Moore said. Installation may take two to four weeks.

SUZETTE HACKNEY can be reached at 313-222-6672 or hackney@freepress.com.

Caption: Photo DAVID P. GILKEY/Detroit Free Press

"She was everything I ever wanted in a wife," Michael Anderson said of Monique Anderson, who died Wednesday night along with their three children and her mother and grandmother. The fire was probably started by a space heater placed too close to a mattress.

FIVE OF THE VICTIMS

Three children, their mother, grandmother and great-grandmother died. No photo was available of the grandmother, Christine **Maurant**.

Nichelle Anderson

Michael Anderson Jr.

Daniel **Maurant**

Monique Anderson

BerniceMaurant

Memo: SIDEBAR ATTACHED

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 1A

Index Terms: FIRE ; DETROIT ; DEATH ; MULTIPLE ; CHILD ; SAFETY ; GUIDELINE ; HEATER ; ACIDENT ; STATISTICS

Record Number: 9912030105

Copyright (c) 1999 Detroit Free Press