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LOCAL NEWS



Siren yelp saves lives

Cop rouses tenants from fourplex blaze

By David Ferris
STAFF WRITER

FREMONT — Three Union City residents owe their lives to quick thinking by Officer Ken Holbrook, who used his siren to rouse and his car to rescue them from their burning fourplex early Monday morning.

Just after 3 a.m., Holbrook and Officer Matt Pardo responded to the fire at Downtown Estates, where Union City resident Najiba Nazari spotted a 1995 Chevrolet Camaro burning in the garage under the apartment at 2173 Skylark Court.

By the time Holbrook and Pardo arrived

at the fourplex, the Camaro and two other cars were engulfed in flame. Witnesses standing nearby told them that people were asleep in the sole upstairs apartment and that nothing they had done could rouse them.

Holbrook realized that the time had come to employ a rescue technique that had occurred to him before. On March 28, 1995, he was one of the first officers to arrive at a fire at 345 Monaco Ave. in Union City. He and his partner stood hopelessly by while two girls, age 5 years and 4 months, perished on the inaccessible second floor.

"We ran around that house three times and just couldn't find a way in," Holbrook said. "I've played that other fire through my mind a thousand times."

Sometime afterward, it occurred to him that the combination of a police cruiser's height and decibel power might come in handy some day.

“We ran around that house three times and just couldn't find a way in.”

Officer Ken Holbrook
describing an earlier fire

That day was Monday. As the fire leaped from the garage to the shake roof, Holbrook steered his cruiser underneath the south-facing windows of the second-floor apartment and hit the alarm that police call the “yelp” — a quick series of short yaps loud enough to wake the dead.

Or at least loud enough to wake the apartment tenants: Michelle Wiggin, 25, and

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Fire: Loud action rescues three

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eight months pregnant, her husband Mark Crouse, 45, and their roommate Dave O'Donoghue, 39.

Holbrook and Pardo stood on the hood of the police car and coached Wiggin to jump. Her landing sent all three of them spilling to the ground. Crouse and O'Donoghue followed thereafter.

The only injury was some pain in Wiggin's ankle, which was treated on the scene.

"(Holbrook's) actions border on heroic, there's no doubt about it at all," said Union City police Lt. Randy Ulibarri. "It takes some intestinal fortitude to hold your mud and get people out like that."

The nine other residents of the complex, who lived on the first floor, escaped without incident. Twenty-four other four-plexes were evacuated as a safety measure.

Damage to the building totaled \$360,000, destroying the upstairs unit and causing heavy

fire and water damage to two other units, said Fremont Fire Department spokesman Dennis Satariano.

The fire caused an additional \$125,000 in damage to building contents and \$61,000 to four cars. The cause of the fire is unknown.

Holbrook, whose ideas proved so effective at the fire, had a harder time describing the incident later Monday.

"This is — how do you put it, you know, we won one this time," he said.

Floods: Snow melt