

TROOPERS SAVE MAN FROM BURNING HOME

With firefighters still minutes away, two Alaska State Troopers entered a burning house on July 13 and saved the life of a man who was passed out in a smoke filled room. Trooper Matt Kessler arrived at the Polaris Lane home only minutes after the call came in at 6:22 p.m. By then, smoke was billowing from an upstairs window where neighbors said the unconscious man was located. It was unknown when firefighters or medics would get there in time to save the man. Trooper Lee Phillips and his recruit, Nick Murphy, arrived not long after Kessler. To Phillips, who suffered third-degree burns during an industrial incident 15 years ago, doing nothing was not an option.

They quickly learned from the neighbors the man's wheelchair-bound mother and her caretaker were also still in the house, but were on the bottom floor where there was less smoke. The neighbors had tried unsuccessfully to reach the son who was in an upstairs bedroom loft and closer to the origin of the fire. After several tries to make it up the stairs, first using masks and even a wet rag in an unsuccessful attempt to protect themselves against the thick, toxic fumes, Phillips and Kessler formulated a plan to reach the incapacitated man. They took turns climbing the stairs while the other one waited at the bottom and watched. If they didn't return within a short amount of time, the other was to rescue him.

"I was watching Phillips run up the stairs and he literally disappeared" into the dense, black smoke, Kessler said.

Meanwhile, fresh out of the academy and only four days into his field training, Murphy was tasked with staying outside to relay any needed

information to dispatchers and make sure no one else went into the burning home. Murphy admits it was a little hard watching two other troopers going into a burning building and not knowing what they were facing inside. "We didn't have a block of training on that" at the academy, he said.



"I didn't realize it was anything out of the ordinary at first until some of the other troopers said that it's not something that we typically do," Murphy said.

After a few more attempts to get to the man, Kessler held his breath and floundered up the stairs until he found the man's foot. He quickly grabbed it, and the man fell from his bed onto the floor, which jolted him awake. Kessler and Phillips steadied him as he climbed down the stairs and out of the house. Phillips and the caretaker helped the man's wheelchair-bound mother get out of the smoky house next.

Medics arrived on scene about five minutes later and firefighters arrived shortly afterwards. The son was taken to the hospital while the rest were checked out by medics on scene. However, the story would have had a much different ending if Kessler and Phillips had not got the man out.

While shift supervisor, Sgt. Troy Shuey, recommends his troopers leave the running into burning buildings up to firefighters, he realizes that Phillips and Kessler saved the man's life.

"It is an example of taking calculated risks and going above and beyond in the performance of their duties," Shuey said.

That's not so uncommon for troopers.

- Beth Ipsen, Public Information Officer (elizabeth.ipsen@alaska.gov) July 31, 2015