

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Preventing Fires at Home

Each year in the autumn, a week is set aside as Fire Prevention Week. During that week, fire departments visit classrooms and publish information about protecting our homes and our families from the hazard of fire. But fire is a hazard all year long, a fact that was brought home to me twice in the past week. The first jolt came when I stood outside my house and watched the firefighters battle the fire at a neighbor's house. The second came from reading about Kristen VandeGeer rescuing the Shrenker children from a fire in their home when she was babysitting.

The suddenness and intensity of those fires emphasized to me the importance of fire prevention tools for each of us to use every week of the year. That is why I am repeating this week some information that I wrote about after a fire prevention demonstration at the East Longmeadow Fire Department.

The demonstration reminded me of similar presentations from my own school days. But the level of education has grown exponentially between then and now. My classmates and I learned not to tamper with the fuse box; today's children lined up for a chance to put out a fire with a home fire extinguisher. Only the enthusiastic teaching by firefighters has remained constant over the years. These are some of the highlights of a modern demonstration.

In a refrain that was repeated again and again the Chief stressed the importance of smoke and heat detectors as an early warning system. He talked of proper placement, offering house calls by the department to recommend appropriate locations for detectors. He stressed the importance of checking for active batteries and further suggested changing those batteries annually, just to be sure.

The staff recommended home fire extinguishers for small kitchen fires, warning residents to evacuate and call for help if the fire persists for more than 30 seconds.

Then it was time for a home sprinkler demonstration. When only three people answered the call for volunteers, the Chief invited me to be the fourth witness to an actual fire. We were secured in a trailer (supplied for the purpose by the Federal Emergency Management Agency) furnished as a kitchen and outfitted with home sprinklers. Firemen then set fire to newspapers in a waste basket in our little house. By the time the fire had burned for 30 seconds, a ceiling temperature of 135 degrees activated the sprinkler which then doused the flames. The smoke alarms sounded even before the sprinkler activated, proving the assertion of the firemen that they are the first line of defense.

If I were building a home today, sprinklers would be part of the design. Since that is not the case, I have adopted the fire prevention and safety measures advocated by the firemen. After the demonstration, I asked the town fire department to check my home to be sure my detectors were appropriately placed. The inspector recommended two additional units at the base of stairwells, which I have installed.

My hat is off to Kristen for her quick action when she was faced with an emergency. I hope the public focus in the wake of the fires that came close to home will provide an impetus for all of us make our homes ready for a fire emergency.