

# Family of house fire thankful for rescue team, support

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An Acton family whose three-year-old son was rescued from their fire-ravaged home last month have received a helping hand from the community with a deluge of donations just a few days before Christmas.

The Nguyens were invited to the Halton Hills Fire Department's Acton station last week to find a startling amount of clothing and toys that filled up several tables and stand-up racks, along with \$6,100 in cash and gift certificates.

"It's amazing. We don't know what to say," said Thi Nguyen, who attempted to enter her burning home on Nov. 17 to rescue her son, but was held back by a part-time firefighter.

"We want to say thank you to everyone for their generosity. We just know that we're so lucky to live here. We're still very sad about the fire, so today this means a lot."

The donations were made at the Acton Santa Claus Parade and in a steady stream of drop-offs at the fire station by residents. An offer of a living room ensemble had to be turned down. Josiah received 43 pairs of jeans and other donations included a set of pots and pans worth more than \$700 as well as a Christmas tree complete with decorations.

"I can't find a prouder moment that I've had as mayor of Halton Hills than to make this presentation to the Nguyen family," said Rick Bonnette.

Thi and husband Khanh emigrated to Alberta about a decade

ago from their native Vietnam and moved to Acton last year after Khanh began working for Brampton-based drywall company.

All of their belongings were lost in the blaze, which caused about \$225,000 damage. Khanh was at work at the time of the fire and five-year-old daughter Liane was in school.

Last week, the family moved into a rental home in Georgetown after spending a couple of weeks in a hotel, but likely won't be able to return to live in their Acton residence for at least a year, Thi estimated, as the interior is gutted and rebuilt.

The cause of the fire has yet to be determined and the Ontario Fire Marshal has yet to complete its investigation, although it's believed the origin of the blaze was in the living room.

"All the time, I have nightmares about fire now," said Thi, closing her eyes.

"A few days ago I dreamed there was an explosion, and I'm running away as fast as I can."

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Firefighters Mark Bailey and Shawn Barnes were sitting down for coffee in the Acton station's lunchroom after conducting some routine inspections around town when the call came in just after 2 p.m. on that Tuesday for a structure fire at 180 Tanners Dr., which is located only a few hundred metres away.

As their rescue truck turned onto the street, the dispatcher confirmed that a child was trapped in the second storey of the home. Thick black smoke bellowed into



The Nguyen family was overwhelmed with emotion when they attended the Acton Fire Station last week to meet with the firefighters who rescued their son Josiah in a Nov. 17 blaze at their Tanners Dr. home and to see what the local community has donated to them. Pictured from left are: Thi Nguyen, Mark Bailey and Shawn Barnes of the Halton Hills Fire Department, Josiah, Khanh and Elina Nguyen and Halton Hills Mayor Rick Bonnette. Photo by Eamonn Maher

the sky, with several people waving frantically in the roadway.

HHFD Capt. Rob Quinton helped Bailey and Barnes suit up quickly and the two climbed the stairwell, as flames licked up the walls.

The smoke was so dense that Bailey, who was taking the lead in the search, couldn't see the screen on his thermal imaging camera that registers heat signatures of possible victims.

"We were like robots," Barnes recalled.

"Our training kicked in. We communicated and did what any other firefighter would've done. It was second nature. We knew we didn't have much time and we didn't even talk to each other. We just made eye contact and thought, 'OK, game on.'"

Keeping in contact by touch, the firefighters called out for Jo-

siah and he could be heard crying, lying on a mattress in the master bedroom. Barnes reached down and scooped up the youngster, but there was still the matter of exiting the building.

Bailey asserted that he knew where the stairs were and led the trio to safety with the aid of Capt. Quinton, who had taken up defensive operations in the house's foyer by hosing down the route of escape for a soot-covered Josiah and his rescuers into the waiting arms of paramedics.

"If (Capt. Quinton) didn't do what did, we wouldn't have had stairs to come down," said Barnes, who has responded to a few calls in which someone was trapped in a home during his 15 years of firefighting. This was the first non-fatality.

"One of the guys said to us, 'Now you can retire. There's noth-

ing else you can do in your careers.' But really, we just showed up for work like it was a normal day."

Not until they sat down to rest after Josiah was shuttled into a waiting ORNGE air ambulance did the magnitude of what happened to Barnes and Bailey begin to register.

"Search and rescue is what we practise the most," added Bailey.

"We focus a lot on it and we try to simulate the worst-case conditions in an old farmhouse so that you'd just go into auto mode if or when the time comes."

Bailey also credited the persuasive words of part-time Acton firefighter Greg Ferguson for preventing Thi and a neighbour from entering the smoke-filled house before the HHFD units arrived.

"He told them, 'If you go in there, you're going to die,'" Bailey said. "Fergie saved both of them."

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