

Orange Mound house fire leaves 7 dead, 3 injured Melrose High senior dies trying to rescue relatives, neighbor says

By Sherri Drake (Contact), Memphis Commercial Appeal
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When others decided that the blazing house was too engulfed and those trapped inside were beyond saving, Deon Poole, hearing the screams of his mother and siblings, charged back in anyway.

With his Orange Mound neighbors watching, the 18-year-old battled thick, black smoke as he rushed through the front door of the duplex on Baltimore Street. Bright orange flames shot from the roof.

The Melrose High senior pushed his pregnant girlfriend to safety from the second-floor window, then disappeared, witnesses said.



Alex McPeak
The Commercial Appeal

Investigators search the back of a house where a fire killed seven and sent three others to burn wards at area hospitals.

"He was incredible," said neighbor Lorenzo Williams, who watched from the yard. "He died trying to do that."

After battling the blaze for 20 minutes Saturday morning, Memphis firefighters found the bodies of Deon Poole, his mother and five child relatives in a downstairs room at 862 Baltimore.

The seven fatalities made it the deadliest Memphis fire in decades -- possibly the worst since a blaze in 1864 that killed 14.

"It was a horrible thing man," Williams said. "There was nothing that we could do but just stand there and look. ... it was blazing too bad."

Memphis firefighters responded at 5:42 a.m. and had the blaze controlled by 6:05 a.m., said Lt. Keith Staples. The cause of the fire is under investigation.

"These have not been ruled fire fatalities," Staples said.

The Shelby County Medical Examiner's Office will determine a cause of death.

About 40 fire personnel and 18 department vehicles responded to the blaze. No firefighters were injured.

Fire investigators haven't determined if the home -- built in the 1950s -- had working smoke detectors.

Family members identified the dead as Melissa Poole, 38; four of her children, Deon Poole, 18, Diamond Poole, 9, Dajanique Poole, 7, and DaShaun Poole, 5; a niece, Arianna Poole, 4, and nephew Rodney Poole, 1.

Melissa Poole's children Darius Poole, 16, and DeAndra Poole, 11, suffered second-degree burns to their faces and hands. Darius was listed in fair condition at the Regional Medical Center at Memphis. DeAndra, who also suffered minor smoke inhalation, was listed in fair condition at Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center.

Deon's girlfriend, whom Poole family members identified only by her first name Rochelle and nickname "Woo-Woo," also suffered second-degree burns and was in good condition at The Med.

Memphis City Schools Supt. Kriner Cash said in a prepared statement that he's assigning grief counselors to Melrose High, Fairview Middle and Hanley Elementary, where four of the victims attended school.

"The entire Memphis City Schools family is deeply saddened by the tragic passing of four of our children today," Cash said. "I ask that the community keep the family in your thoughts and prayers."

Darius, a junior, plays receiver for Melrose High's football team. Players and coaches said they had their teammate in their thoughts and prayers at Saturday afternoon's jamboree at the Fairgrounds.

"That is our brother and our team member; everyone was thinking about him," said assistant coach Tariq Smith.

Coaches asked the team if they still wanted to play Saturday.

"We decided to play and dedicate it to Darius," said senior linebacker Gregory King.

After the jamboree, the 80 players and coaches went to Darius' house, where they greeted, prayed and cried with the grieving family.

"It touched them," King said. "It made them happy to see us."

The team planned to visit Darius in the hospital Saturday evening.

As fire investigators searched the burned house, the victims' relatives and friends embraced and neighbors watched from porches. Dozens sat on curbs or walked the street, while others rode by in cars or on bicycles, just to get a glimpse of what remained.

"My body's numb right now," said Melinda Poole, Melissa's twin sister. "I just can't believe it."

Melinda rushed over in her red tank top and plaid pajama pants when she got the devastating news at about 6:30 a.m. The youngest victims, Arianna and Rodney, are her grandchildren.

"Right now, all I can do is stand right here and ask God to give me strength," she said, standing near the yellow police tape that blocked off her sister's home.

Melissa Poole had lived in the home for about two years, relatives said. Her young niece and nephew had spent the night Friday.

By Saturday night, a wooden utility pole in front of the home had become a makeshift memorial with many stuffed animals.

Lamar Boyce, 24, who lives next door, said he saw DeAndra jump from the second-floor window.

Boyce's girlfriend Nikko Moore, 34, grabbed a water hose. "It was like paper, just burning quick," Moore said.

"That little water hose wasn't going to do nothing," Boyce said. "Fire was everywhere . . . We tried. We couldn't do nothing."

Moore cried as she talked about the Poole children playing with her daughters. "I can't believe they're gone," Moore said. "You just look up and they're gone."

Alicia Bradley, 31, described her cousin Melissa as a "loving mother." "She cherished those kids."

Bradley said Deon's courageous act showed how much he loved his family.

"It's not surprising for him to have gone back in and tried," Bradley said.

The family's trying to stay strong, but "it's a hard pill to swallow," Bradley said.

"We're just going to be there for the ones that did make it through."

-- Sherri Drake Silence: 529-2510

Staff reporter Nevin Batiwalla contributed to this story.

The dead

Relatives have identified those killed as:

Melissa Poole, 38

Deon Poole, 18

Diamond Poole, 9

Dajanique Poole, 7

DaShaun Poole, 5

Arianna Poole, 4

Rodney Poole, 1

The injured

Darius Poole, 16, fair condition

DeAndra Poole, 11, fair condition

A 17-year-old female, good condition



Fire deaths in Memphis

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An early morning house fire Saturday at 862 Baltimore in Orange Mound left seven people dead and three injured.

Over the past 10 years, more than 150 people have died in fires in Memphis. The numbers range from a low of one death in 2005 to a high of 31 deaths in 1999. Before Saturday's tragedy in Orange Mound, six people had died in fires this year -- including two boys, 4 and 7, who died in an early-morning fire on Jan. 1 at 3224 Thirteen Colony Mall, near Mendenhall and Knight Arnold roads in Fox Meadows.

Deadliest blaze in Memphis history

On Dec. 24, 1864, a fire that raced through a dwelling above a bakery on Madison, between Main and Second, killed 14 people. It was the single deadliest fire in the city's history, according to the Web site of the Fire Museum of Memphis. www.firemuseum.com

Recent Fires with multiple fatalities

March 14, 2006: An adult and two children died, two residents were injured and four Memphis firefighters were injured in a fire at the Oakview Apartments near Kimball and Lamar in Orange Mound.

Dec. 23, 2001: Two adults and three children died as the result of a fire that swept through their Midtown Memphis apartment.

Oct. 5, 1999: A mother and four children died in a fire at 3623 Suzanne near Mountain Terrace in Frayser.

Dec. 19, 1999: Three infant girls -- a 2-year-old and 1-year-old twins -- died in a house fire at 3268 Seminole in Orange Mound.

Dec. 28, 1998: Two adults and three children were killed in a blaze at the Kirby Oaks condominiums in southeast Shelby County.

Jan. 10, 1998: Five people, including four children, died in a fire at Horn Lake Heights Apartments in South Memphis.