

This blaze extra-hard on kindly firefighters; injured 4-year-old boy part of 'adopted' family

By Jody Callahan

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This wasn't how the Memphis Fire Department was supposed to visit the tiny home in Frayser. Firefighters weren't supposed to roll up in engine trucks and rescue vehicles Tuesday afternoon, pouring water into the blackened home at 2785 Beechmont.

They weren't supposed to find 4-year-old Leonard "JoJo" Tubbs unconscious in a back room of the house, suffering from smoke inhalation.

Instead, the 10 members of the B shift at Fire Station 27 in Frayser were supposed to roll up sometime around Christmas Eve.

Instead of hoses and axes, their arms would be full of toys and socks and winter coats and furniture for the family of six shoehorned into that now-ruined house.

"We wanted them to have toys on Christmas morning, and it ended up they needed more than toys," Fire Department Lt. Bobby Qualls said.



Mike Maple/The Commercial Appeal
Fire investigators comb through
debris Tuesday at 2785 Beechmont in
Frayser

It all began a couple of months ago when firefighters responded to reports of a gas leak near the home.

While there, they noticed that Kim Bateman, Leonard Tubbs and their four children were having a rough time. That prompted a discussion in the firehouse as the holidays approached.

"Everybody mentioned this family and said there's a real need here," Qualls said. "We rode by one day, hung a smoke detector. While we were hanging it, we did a little homework and saw this was a legitimate need."

So they asked Bateman and Tubbs if it would be OK if they helped make Christmas a little brighter for JoJo, Christopher, 6, Madison, 1, and 2-month-old Charles.

"When I told her we wanted to help her buy her children's Christmas, (she said) they were just talking about whether they were going to pay rent or have Christmas," Qualls said. "That told me it was real."

So on Tuesday morning, Qualls and Lt. Mark Eskew got up early and went shopping, hoping to make their \$600 stretch to cover everything the family needed. They were buying clothes, sure, but they were getting toys, too.

"We wanted to let them have a Christmas where they could feel like kids," Eskew said.

Then their pagers started going off.

Then a second time.

That's how they got the news, with their arms full of gifts.

They went to the hospital to see how JoJo was doing. His mom had been able to get the other kids out safely, but she hadn't been able to reach JoJo, Division Chief Henry Posey said.

The fire's cause remains unknown.

Then they went back to the smoldering house to see what they could salvage for the family. It wasn't much.

Now, the situation has changed.

They aren't sure exactly where the family will be or what they'll need, but those firefighters are going to make sure that the family still has a Christmas.

"We're obviously not going to waver in this time of need," Eskew said. "We'll step up."