



Teens help man burned by torch

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By Salina Ali

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Walter Bartell, fearing a ticket from the city of Jackson, was cutting a used gasoline tank with a torch and unwittingly made heroes out of four local teens.

"He was cutting the tank to take it to the scrap yard," said Bartell's daughter, Sue Rashke. "It wasn't for money. He was cleaning up the yard so he wouldn't be ticketed."

Bartell, 67, was released Saturday from the University of Michigan Hospital and is recovering from third- and second-degree burns on his hands, neck and head at his home, Rashke said.

He was seriously burned Nov. 1 while using a cutting torch to open a gasoline tank that exploded in his face.

"He's done it a million times and that never happened," Rashke said.

Rashke, who was standing nearby, rushed to help her father using the drop-and-roll technique and tried using her coat to smother the flames on his body.

"I remember three guys coming over and more people were coming as it went on," Rashke said.

"It all happened so fast."

James Graves and Benjamin Pruden-Hayes, both 17, Daniel Pruden-Hayes, 15, and Chad Bedell, 19, all from Jackson, were across the street at 1512 TenEyck when the tank exploded.

"I'm glad he's all right," Bedell said. "I didn't want to see him burned and die. He's a nice guy."

Family and friends contacted the Citizen Patriot and the Jackson Fire Department hoping the young men would be recognized for their efforts.

"They came across the street and saved the guy, and that's fantastic," Assistant Fire Chief Brian Thurston said.

"I'll have to talk to the chief about doing something for the boys. That was a good thing they did."

Benjamin Pruden-Hayes, ran out of the house dressed only in his shorts. "We were in my house watching TV when we heard 'Boom!' then my mom ran in screaming, 'He's on fire,'" he said. "I went to the screen door and saw him on fire and took off. All I kept thinking was, 'Don't let him die.'"

The teens saw Rashke struggling to extinguish the flames.

"Ben grabbed the jacket from the lady and we were patting him with our hands until he was out," Graves said. "It was crazy."

After the flames were extinguished, Bedell moved the burning gas tank away from the garage, while Graves turned off the torch hoses connected to the acetylene tank that were laying on top of the burning tank, Daniel Pruden-Hayes said.

"It was a good feeling because I helped someone else," Graves said. "I know if it was me, he'd do it for me."

The teens originally planned to visit Bartell in the hospital but waited until they were able to visit him at his home.

"He thanked us a lot and told us if we ever needed anything to come on across the street," Benjamin Pruden-Hayes said. "He also said he's getting rid of the torches."

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