

The Times

TIGARD | TUALATIN | SHERWOOD



News | Opinion | Features | Sports | Sustainable Life | US & World News | Classifieds | Contact Us

Printer-friendly version Email story link

Rising from the ashes

Kim Williams says she won't let her family go through another devastating fire

BY JENNIFER CLAMPET

The Times, May 1, 2008, *Updated May 4, 2008*



JAIME VALDEZ / THE TIMES

WHAT REMAINS – Kim Williams sifts through the remains of her home off of Robbins Road just outside of Tualatin. She picked up a bundle of paper not completely destroyed by the April 4 fire that gutted her home. Not surprisingly, the surviving paperwork turned out to be a bill.

Standing just inside the fence line that encircles the charred remains of her home, Kim Williams stiffens her back when she talks about rebuilding.

But as she stares past the brittle, blackened and chaotic mess that was her 3,200-square-foot house, she tears up.

Her family lost everything after a fire completely destroyed their house on Robbins Road just outside of Tualatin. All that's left is a concaved pile of burnt debris and ashes surrounded by what's left of the scorched walls and support beams.

On April 4, Williams and her husband Michael Blackmon were just about to board a plane at the Portland International Airport when police officers escorted them off with the news that their home was on fire. The scorching image of the family's home engulfed in flames was filmed and broadcast on television by a helicopter news crew.

And as the fire died down and investigators began to search for a cause, Williams said she and her family avoided the crowd of media. They even hired security to control the flocks of people who thought it OK to travel down their driveway to gawk at the remains left by the fire.

As Williams backed away from the eyesore which greets her every morning as she peers out the windows of her family's 300-square-foot RV, she confidently nodded her head.

"We will not go through this again," she said.

Williams and her husband plan to join the less than 5 percent of homeowners in the Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue service area who volunteer to install residential sprinkler systems in their new homes.

Williams' sentiment is often the driving force for residents who take it upon themselves to install a residential sprinkler system, said Deputy Fire Marshall and longtime sprinkler advocate Eric McMullen.

"Unless you've lived it, experienced it, you just don't get it," McMullen said. "The people who are doing it voluntarily, unfortunately, are the ones who have had a fire experience."

Residential sprinkler systems are considered life safety systems. The systems are meant to douse a fire just long enough to give occupants time to evacuate. But often, the systems do put out the fires, McMullen said. And while some insurance companies look at the systems more as a liability for possible water-damage issues, McMullen said the idea behind the sprinklers should be the selling point: it can save lives.

A database created just six months ago by TVF&R has about 250 homes recorded as having sprinkler systems — but that is only a sampling of homes reported to have sprinkler systems in the TVF&R service areas.

McMullen said the agency doesn't have a clear picture of how many homes actually have systems installed. Builders go through city building departments for the system installations and once installed there's no follow-up on inspecting the systems. McMullen said TVF&R is trying to reach out with a new direct-mailing program to keep residents up to date on what they need to do to keep their systems working.

McMullen said a majority of builders who "volunteer" to install residential sprinklers do so for trade-offs. In exchange for the installation TVF&R looks at compromising on other requirements for the builder like access for fire apparatus including steep driveways and more than one access point for a subdivision.

Within the next decade, TVF&R officials expect every home in a planned 2,500-home development of Villebois in Wilsonville to have sprinkler systems installed, McMullen said.

On average, the installation of residential sprinkler system can cost about \$1.50 per square foot. The comparison would be like asking for a carpet or countertop upgrade, he said.

And as Williams, a co-owner of a contracting business, noted, the look of residential sprinkler systems has changed over the past few years. The dropdown sprinklers have been replaced with sprinkler heads that are covered with discs and only drop down when activated by heat.

And McMullen was quick to point out that it is a myth that setting off one sprinkler head means all the heads activate. McMullen noted that the sprinkler system heads are activated individually.

And as mentioned before with insurance companies that view the systems as possible problems for water-damage claims, McMullen stressed that sometimes it's better to deal with a few water-damaged couches than the destruction of an entire house or the loss of human life.

"It's like with Kim Williams' home. It would have had water damage, yes. But right now they have nothing," McMullen said.

The smell of charred wood still wafts from the site of Williams' home. She makes a brief reference to the amount of smoke that poured from her burning home on April 4. She remembered watching as fire crews shuttled water to the scene. Being outside city limits, her home was nowhere near fire hydrants. Although, TVF&R officials said that fire hydrants wouldn't have helped to save the home.

It was too far gone by the time crews got there, within three minutes of receiving a 9-1-1 call from a passing motorist.

"We pretty much lost everything," Williams said.

It will be another 18 months before Williams, her husband and their 7-year-old son will be able to move into a newly constructed home.

Williams said there's no question that they will install a sprinkler system.