

Documentary Showcases Bravery At Harrowing Vernon Tenement Fire

The acts of those at a Vernon apartment building fire last March are showcased in a documentary.

Chris Dehnel, Patch Staff

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The fire at 80-82 Union St. last March. (Chris Dehnel/Patch)

VERNON, CT — The team efforts at a harrowing 2021 fire in a Vernon tenement are being featured on a national documentary.

The fire took place at 80-82 Union Street last March. A raging inferno trapped residents on the third floor and the building was engulfed in smoke.

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A rescue team that sprang to action spared no title — in addition to firefighters and police officers, a registered nurse from nearby Rockville General Hospital, an Air National Guard sergeant who lived next door and Vernon's town administrator and emergency management director sprang into action and the two people trapped on the third floor were rescued.

The efforts that day are being showcased in a documentary television series called "Hearts of Heroes." The show airs Saturday mornings on ABC television stations and can also be viewed on YouTube. The show "showcases the stories of men and women braving natural disasters with one goal: to rescue the victims and help restore their lives."

The program's producers interviewed those involved in the rescue, including Vernon Firefighters Kevin Bowman, Blake St. John and Stan Landry, Brett Rinehart (a nurse at Rockville General Hospital), and Nathan Pisani (an Air National Guard sergeant), Vernon police officer Allison Lawrence and Michael Purcaro, Vernon's town administrator and emergency management director.

Each described what they saw that afternoon on Union Street and what they did after learning people on the third floor needed their help. The fire also spilled into an adjacent residents on Ward Street.

"Our first responders can always be counted on to give their all to help our residents," Mayor Dan Champagne said. "For 30 years, I've watched the men and women of this town place themselves in harm's way to help anyone in need. It's awe inspiring. But it's not surprising. These folks live to serve."

Landry and St. John climbed the ladder that came up about three feet short of the window, but despite that plucked the couple from danger. Bowman was the driver of the first truck to arrive at the scene, which carried that ladder that was essential to the rescue, and describes for viewers the unique way he was dispatched.

Rinehart, a former firefighter, grabbed the ladder off Bowman's truck and began to raise it toward the window where the people were trapped. The others, including Pisani, Lawrence and Purcaro, assisted by helping to move and then steady the ladder, even as hot embers fell on them and broken glass smashed on their heads.

"This was the right group of people in the right place at the right time," said Fire Chief Stephen Eppler, who is also featured in the program. "Without the selfless response by this group of people, we could have had a tragedy."

Purcaro, who had just left Town Hall, headed toward Union Street when he heard the fire and police departments get dispatched.

"This was truly an example of neighbors-helping-neighbors," Purcaro said. "The teamwork demonstrated that day exemplifies the strength and character of our Vernon community. I am grateful and proud of all who answered the call for help, especially our first responders who selflessly protect and serve our residents."

Hearts of Heroes is sponsored by BELFOR Property Restoration, whose CEO, Sheldon Yellen, travelled to Vernon to meet and interview those involved in the rescues.