

The Payne Family, Scunthorpe

In April 2002, the Payne family learnt first hand about the importance of making a fire action plan when their home was engulfed by flames in the middle of the night. Stephanie Payne and her family became trapped in the upstairs of their home after a fire in the bathroom made their usual exit route – the stairs – blocked.

It was 4am in the morning and Stephanie, her husband Michael, their two children Paul (23) and Katy (21), and Katy's partner Lee, were sound asleep. Stephanie and her husband, who sleep at the back of their semi-detached home, were suddenly woken by the sound of the smoke alarm. "We got a real shock, hearing the alarm ringing", said Stephanie. "I reached out to turn on the bedside light and found the entire bedroom was filled with this smoke".

The Payne's only had a smoke alarm on the ground floor of their home. As the fire had started upstairs in the bathroom, the entire top-floor had been swamped in smoke *before* the ground floor alarm had sounded. When Michael tried to open the bedroom door, he was immediately beaten back by the dense smoke filling the hall.

"We became really worried at this point, it seemed we were trapped," said Stephanie. Terrified for her son and daughter, Stephanie started banging on the wall to Katy and Lee in the neighbouring bedroom.

Meanwhile, Michael had opened the bedroom window and climbed out. Luckily, the Payne's had recently moved their garden shed and it was conveniently placed outside the bedroom window. Once safely on the ground, Michael went to summon help.

However the fire brigade were already speeding to the family's aid, alerted by a mobile call from Paul from inside the house. Paul, his sister Katy and her boyfriend, Lee, were led down ladders to safety by firefighters.

However, Stephanie was still trapped in her bedroom at the back of the house. Partially disabled with arthritis in her hips, she was unable to climb down the ladder. To rescue Stephanie, the firefighters had to go through the smoke filled upper floors to locate the fire. The source was found to be a light fitting in the bathroom, which had fallen onto the carpet and ignited. The fire was put out and Stephanie was taken down the stairs by firefighters.

Stephanie said: "I never thought for a moment that a fire would start in my home. You always think fires start because people are careless, but it can happened to anyone".

Mike Owen of Humberside Fire Brigade said, "The Payne's were very lucky. Had they put together a fire action plan they could have taken into account Stephanie's arthritis. At least they had one smoke alarm fitted; it definitely saved their lives. But fitting an alarm on each level of the house would have got them to safety a lot sooner."

Zoe Charlesworth, Leeds

Zoe Charlesworth was a typical fun-loving 19 year-old. A devoted mum, she always put her three-year old son Bradley first. Tragically, Zoe's young life was cut short by a house fire that almost claimed Bradley's life too.

On the 15th January 2001, Zoe and Bradley were asleep in an upstairs bedroom of their house in the Halton Moor area of Leeds, unaware that a fire was starting downstairs. It is now believed that a clothes horse had been left too close to a lighted gas fire in the living room. As the heat built up, clothing airing on the dryer began to smoulder and burn. The living room door had been left open, allowing hot, toxic smoke to fill the lounge and spread to the hall.

It is thought that Zoe was woken by the smoke coming into the bedroom. Had she had time to close the door, it would have held the smoke back for a time. Tragically, the windows in the bedroom were locked and Zoe did not have any keys to open them.

The fire downstairs had taken hold by now, and there was no route for Zoe and Bradley to escape. In panic, Zoe began banging on the bedroom window to call for help.

By this time Zoe's parents, Geoffrey and Karen had arrived on the scene. They looked on anxiously as some local workmen tried in vain to rescue Zoe and Bradley. A neighbour had called the Fire Brigade, who arrived within four minutes. A team wearing breathing apparatus broke down the door and found Zoe and Bradley huddled together upstairs. Once outside, firefighters administered CPR to Bradley and both were rushed to hospital suffering from the effects of smoke inhalation.

Miraculously Bradley was released from hospital the next day, but Zoe had to be transferred to a special burns unit. Tragically she contracted Septicaemia from her injuries and died five days later.

There was no smoke alarms fitted in the house. Had there been, Zoe would have been alerted to the fire earlier and given time to escape. Tellingly the only room in the house that did not suffer any damage was the back bedroom where the door had been closed.

Karen Joyson says of her daughter: "Zoe was a great girl with so much to live for. She was about to go back to college to study hairdressing and make a future for her and Bradley. She was a brilliant mum and would have done anything to protect Bradley".

Case study from the How would you all get out alive? campaign

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Bradley now lives with his grandmother. The local community have also set up a trust fund to help him in the future.

Ian Purcell from West Yorkshire Fire Service Fire Investigation Team says:
“I would urge everyone to think about how they would escape from their house in the event of a fire. These tragic circumstances illustrate how important it is to know where the keys are to unlock the doors and windows in your home. Also people should make sure the doors in their home are closed when they go to bed at night as this can prevent the spread of fire. Most importantly every home should have working smoke alarms. They are cheap, easy to fit and ultimately save lives”.