

Father Nature's Ferret Rescue Destroyed By Fire

A New Jersey-based ferret rescue is destroyed by fire, and operators Keith and Evelyn Krysz are working to rebuild it.

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Posted: February 6, 2009, 10:15 p.m. EST

“We may be down, but we’re not out. We’ll rebuild.”

Keith Krysz stated this emphatically in a phone interview less than two weeks after a fire destroyed the home in Wood Ridge, New Jersey, where he and his wife, Evelyn, had operated Father Nature’s Ferret Rescue since 2006. The couple escaped with only the clothes on their back. Three ferrets from the rescue survived, but 25 ferrets died from smoke inhalation.

Flames Destroy The Home And Ferret Rescue

Keith’s memories of the fire are vivid. Early in the morning on January 25, 2009, he woke to a strange noise, an unfamiliar beeping. He had nodded off on the couch in the living room. On waking, he saw smoke pouring through the floorboards. Then the smoke alarms started going off all over the house. The unfamiliar beep had been the carbon monoxide detector.

Evelyn came running down the stairs and managed to pick up the bottom portion of a Ferret Nation cage that was in the living room. It contained Charger, a ferret that had only been at the rescue for three weeks and had required special nursing care. Evelyn got the cage to the porch.

Keith tried to go downstairs to save the other ferrets, but the smoke was too thick. He got two fire extinguishers from the garage and broke the basement window to shoot at the flames. He knocked down the flames twice, using up both extinguishers, but, unknown to him, gas was feeding the fire. The low water cut off on the boiler had failed. The boiler had been inspected just a few months before, and the failure was a freak occurrence.

A policeman arrived and Keith grabbed the officer’s fire extinguisher and tried to go down the stairs again. He couldn’t, so he shot at the flames through the broken window. The fire truck arrived and he was pulled from the area. He said that’s when he lost it. He screamed for the ferrets.

The fire hydrant was six houses away, so the fire truck had to back up to get hooked up. The flames had crawled up between the walls of the house. By the time water got going, the flames had reached the roof. The house was gone within an hour.

Keith recalls kneeling in the middle of the street. “My babies were all dying, and I couldn’t do anything to save them.”

A fireman in a white helmet came to him carrying two ferrets that survived, Sam and Irwin. Those two had been in a cage on the main level of the house. Irwin was actually one of the first two ferrets to be rescued by Father Nature’s Ferret Rescue and part of the reason the rescue ever opened.

The Ferrets

The 25 ferrets that perished in the fire all died from smoke inhalation. Matthew, a good friend of Keith’s, went to the house after the fire with Keith’s father to collect the bodies. Neither Keith nor Evelyn could face that task. A neighbor later told Keith that he was moved to tears by how carefully Matthew handled the ferrets. He picked them up one by one, kissed and hugged each, and carefully wrapped it in a new hammock.

“We’ll never forget them,” Keith said. Not a day has gone by since the fire that he hasn’t broken down. “Just imagine all of your children dying at once. I’ve got an empty place in my heart, and I don’t know when it will go away, if ever.”

The 25 ferrets were taken to a veterinarian for cremation, and their ashes remain there. It will cost \$420 to retrieve them, and Keith is concentrating on the living at the moment. A ferret owner with a ferret that needs adrenal surgery recently came to the rescue for help. She can keep her ferret, but can’t afford the surgery. Keith believes rescue isn’t just about taking in unwanted ferrets, but also about helping ferrets stay in their homes if the current owner can get a bit of help. So he’s working to raise money for this ferret’s adrenal surgery.

The tragedy has made Keith and Evelyn rethink some things. They had escape routes planned for disaster, but they never expected something to happen in the basement. The plans for the new house call for more than one ramp in the large family room that will house the ferrets, so cages on wheels can be moved out easily. The plans also call for a sprinkler system. "This will never, ever happen again," Keith said. "We learned the hard way about the need for multiple escape routes."

When the fire marshal allowed them back in the house, they found only three items basically undamaged by the fire — their wedding photos, in a frame that had fallen from the wall and been trapped between the couch and the wall; two urns that held the ashes of all ferrets from the shelter that had died; and the sign for their ferret rescue. They took this as a sign that they were meant to be together and to run the ferret shelter.

"We love these little guys," Keith said. "They're like shooting stars because their life is too short. I could die a happy man the day ferrets live to be 15 years old."

Ferret People Are The Best

Keith is amazed by the outpouring of help from the ferret community. He said donations are coming in from around the world, including Israel and Norway. And he just found out that someone signed them up for ABC's Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. A petition is circulating to get the show to rebuild the rescue.

The insurance company is predicting it will take a year before the home is rebuilt. This seems unchangeable, but to Keith this is unacceptable. Now is typically the busy season for the shelter because of the Christmas "blow back." This is when people who got a ferret for Christmas realize they can't keep it for some reason, be it allergies, expense, time commitment or whatever.

But despite being in ashes, the rescue isn't gone.

"We're not even closed," Keith said. "We're bringing ferrets into foster homes at this time."

Charger, Sammy and Irwin are three of the ferrets in foster homes right now. The hotel where the insurance company has Keith and Evelyn living doesn't allow pets. The couple moves to temporary housing in less than a week, and are counting the days until they can have Charger, Sammy and Irwin with them again as personal pets. They aren't permitted to run a ferret shelter in the temporary housing.

Keith couldn't say enough about the dedication of his wife to the ferrets. "She's the backbone of Father Nature's, on the front line 24/7." She even took a job as a crossing guard to support the rescue.

"We've got a support group of people like you wouldn't believe," Keith said. "I have made more friends in the past two years that I truly call friends than I have in the past 45. It's not just the common interest of ferrets. [People in the ferret community] are special."

Keith sends out fuzzy hugs and greetings to all from Father Nature's Ferret Rescue. He invites people in the area who have a ferret and need help to contact them.

When the rescue is rebuilt, look out. Keith said they'll regain their nickname as the Six Flags For Ferrets and have the safest shelter where ferrets can feel completely at ease. The rescue placed more than 700 ferrets in its brief history, and Keith wants to continue helping ferrets.