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# House fire claims the life of 2 young girls

## Community rallies to support family

By Annalise Braught  
The Bemidji Pioneer

**LIBERTY TOWNSHIP** — Tragedy struck ahead of Christmas in Bemidji as the lives of two young girls were claimed by fire on Thursday morning.

Around 6:12 a.m. on Dec. 23, the Beltrami County dispatch center received a call of a residential fire in the 9000 block of Pony Lake Road NW in Liberty Township. Initial reports indicated that two children in the residence were unaccounted for and were possibly trapped in an upstairs bedroom.

The house, located around 13 miles north of Bemidji, was being rented by Kathy Elton.

The Seelye sisters Ace-Lynn, 6, and RaeLynn, 5, were spending the night with Elton, who is fondly referred to as the girls' "hand-picked grandma," so their mother, Amber Kramer, could wrap presents and do some last-minute Christmas preparations.

Elton's daughter, Kallie Castonguay, told the Pioneer that Elton woke up to the smell of burning rubber.

"So she tried to put it out and ran to get help from another tenant to see what was smelling,"

Castonguay said. "By the time she got back to the source it was engulfed in flames."

When emergency personnel arrived, they found the second floor of the two-story building fully engulfed in flames. Bemidji Fire Chief Justin Sherwood said firefighters located the bedroom window and attempted a rescue but were unsuccessful.

At 10:45 a.m., the sheriff's office announced that emergency personnel continued to search for possible victims at the scene. An update shortly after 1 p.m. said two bodies were recovered from the fire. The victims were transported to the medical examiner's office for autopsy and identification.

There were 45 firefighters working to put out the fire with 16 pieces of equipment, including members of the Bemidji, Shevlin, Solway and Blackduck fire departments. Bemidji Ambulance Service and Minnesota State Patrol also responded to the scene.

Sherwood said that firefighters were at the scene for more than eight hours and the house was deemed a total loss.

**FIRE:** Page A7



Photos by Annalise Braught / Bemidji Pioneer

The Door is located at 155 First Ave. NE in Laporte and serves as a homeless shelter and coffee shop combo.

# 'A DOORWAY INTO THE NEXT STEP'

Laporte's 'The Door' coffee shop serves as an emergency shelter for community

By Madelyn Haasken  
The Bemidji Pioneer

**N**estled in the heart of Laporte sits one of the oldest homes in town, decked out in holiday decor with a large "coffee" flag fluttering in the front yard. From the outside, it looks like your average small-town cafe. For the community, though, it's so much more.

A homeless shelter and coffee shop combo, The Door – located at 155 First Ave. NE – opened in March and is situated in a fully renovated historical home that was originally built in 1906.

Upon entering the cozy coffee shop, customers are greeted by a full menu of coffees, teas and smoothies, as well as breakfast and lunch items. It's a place for guests to kick back, enjoy a bite to eat and admire a piece of Laporte's history.

The second floor of the home, however, is a different story – it serves as an emergency homeless shelter. Owners Joyce and Kevin



Joyce and Kevin Day opened The Door on March 24, 2021, as a dual coffee shop and homeless shelter for those in need of emergency housing.

Day use the proceeds from the coffee shop to help support the ongoing expenses of the shelter.

The upstairs level, made up of four bedrooms, a bathroom and a sitting area, is set up as a safe oasis for people going through the hardships of homelessness.

Residents come from many walks of life – some are newly homeless, some have

been for years. Many, Joyce said, are freshly out of rehabilitation programs or are trying to escape domestic violence situations.

The couple welcomes residents with open arms, offering them a warm bed, clothes and homemade meals, all for no charge. Residents can live at the home for up to 30 days, and throughout their stay, Joyce and her husband Kevin assist them with

anything they might need to get back on their feet.

"We help them look for places (to live), we help them look for jobs and we help them with financing. It's mostly just support in making those phone calls, getting them a social security card or filing taxes," Joyce said. "A lot of it is just guiding them through basic life stuff."

**THE DOOR:** Page A5



Contributed / Bemidji Fire Department

Local emergency personnel responded to a house fire early Thursday morning, Dec. 23, in the 9000 block of Pony Lake Road NW in Liberty Township, located about 13 miles northwest of Bemidji.

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# Man dies after vehicle falls through ice

Woman survives  
incident off  
Diamond Point Park

By Annalise Braught  
The Bemidji Pioneer

**BEMIDJI** — A man has died after his vehicle fell through the Lake Bemidji ice on Friday evening.

According to an original release from Bemidji Fire Chief Justin Sherwood, at 5:11 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 24, the fire department responded to a report that a vehicle had fallen through the ice with two people in the water near the 1700 block of Birchmont Drive NE.



Annalise Braught / Bemidji Pioneer

Barricades surround a hole in the ice near Diamond Point Park on Sunday morning, Dec. 26, 2021, after a vehicle broke through Lake Bemidji on Friday evening.

A release from Beltrami County Sheriff Ernie Beitel was sent out late Saturday night

**DEATH:** Page A5

OBITUARIES

**Ruby Q. Hausauer**



Ruby Q. Hausauer, 101, of Bemidji, MN, died Monday, December 20, 2021, at Gold Pine Home in Bemidji, MN.

Graveside services will be held at 1pm, January 4th 2022, at the Evergreen Cemetery in Brainerd, MN, under the direction of the Cease Family Funeral Home in Bemidji.

Ruby was born on July 22, 1920, on a farm near Revillo, South Dakota. She was the daughter of Daniel and Minnie (Krauss) Quirk. She moved with her family to Brainerd, MN, in 1932. After graduating from high school in 1938, she started her career with Northwestern Bell Telephone Company in Brainerd as a Service Representative in the business office. In 1955, she transferred to the Detroit Lakes District office as an instructor, training service representatives. In 1965, she transferred to the Duluth District Employment office of Northwestern Bell and retired in July of 1975 with 35 1/2 years of service.

Ruby married Kenneth Hausauer on August 12, 1967, in Duluth, MN, and they adopted his nephew Robert. In August 1975, they moved to Bemidji where Ken was the Director at the Vocational Technical Institution. He retired in 1984 and they spent winters in Texas, Arizona, San Diego, and Bradenton, FL, until Ken's death in 2009.

Ruby was a member of the Methodist Church in Brainerd, Duluth, Bradenton, FL, and Bemidji. She was a past member of Sweet Adeline, Eastern Star, and Telephone Pioneers. Her interests included travel, gardening, crossword, sudoku puzzles, and reading.

She is survived by her son Robert Hausauer in Duluth, grandson Jacob Hausauer in Minneapolis, granddaughter Jessica Trombley in Boulder, Co., and 3 great granddaughters Azure, Lily, and Josephine. She was preceded in death by her parents, husband, and sister.

**Sally Djonne**



Sally Darlyn Djonne, age 82, of Bemidji Minnesota, passed away at GoldPine Home on Tuesday, December 14, 2021, surrounded by family.

Sally was born in Jamestown, North Dakota, on April 25, 1939, a daughter of Raymond and Mildred (Christensen) Gushwa. She graduated from Pine River High School, Pine River, Minnesota, in 1957 and was the Valedictorian of her class. After graduation she married Bernard Picolet; together they three children. In November 1991, Sally married Wesley Djonne, gaining two stepchildren

She was employed with the Cass Lake First National Bank then later in the Bemidji North Country Hospital physical therapy department, where she retired. Sally enjoyed shopping, reading, flower gardening, playing bridge with friends and listening to Wes sing and play the guitar.

Sally is survived by Wesley, her loving husband of 30 years; her children Rachelle (Terry Bartels) Fuller, Melessa Hunter, and Vinson (Cindy) Picolet; stepchildren Traci (James) Schanke and Todd (Jenny) Djonne; ten grandchildren: Jeremy, Brent (Beth) and Ross Fuller, Jennifer Degn; Jaime, Cole, and Kyle Fredrickson; Heather Snipes, Amber (Sean) and Ryan (Amy) Picolet; three step-grandchildren: Sophia, Sarah (Matt Notermann) and Eric Djonne, and 18 great grandchildren.

In addition to her parents, Sally was preceded in death by her sisters Betty Rick and Catherine Schmidt, her brothers Bud, Shorty and James Gushwa and her son in law, Ronald Hunter.

Cremation arrangements are under the direction of the Olson-Schwartz Funeral Home and Cremation Services, Bemidji Minnesota.

A memorial service will take place in Spring 2022.

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Contributed photos

Seeyle sisters AceLynn, 6, and RaeLynn, 5, died in a house fire on Dec. 23 in Liberty Township around 13 miles north of Bemidji.

**FIRE**

From Page A1

No firefighter injuries were reported, but one adult female suffered injuries and was transported to the Sanford Bemidji Medical Center.

Castonguay confirmed that Elton had tried to reenter the house to get the girls and suffered smoke inhalation in the process.

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims and their families during this difficult time," Sheriff Ernie Beitel said in a release.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation by the sheriff's office, the Minnesota Fire Marshal's Office and Bemidji Fire Department.

"A special thank you to Heroes Rise Coffee Company and area residents for supplying food, water and coffee to our responders," Sherwood said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with all involved in today's tragic event."

**Community support**

Within hours of the news breaking, the community rallied to support the families affected by the tragedy.

Castonguay started a GoFundMe to help raise money for Elton to replace some of her belongings after losing everything in the fire.

"As you may have heard, my mother who just lost her oldest child (right before Thanksgiving), lost her home to a tragic fire," the GoFundMe reads. "She has lost everything, purse, belongings, loved ones, animals and so much more."

As of Tuesday afternoon, just over \$10,119 had been donated of the \$20,000 goal.

Kayla Stellick, a close family friend, start-

ed a separate GoFundMe to raise money to cover funeral expenses for AceLynn and RaeLynn. By Tuesday afternoon \$32,200 had been donated.

"As you can imagine, the family of these girls are heartbroken," the GoFundMe said. "These girls meant everything to Amber. She loved them so much. After having three boys, she wanted a little girl so bad, then she was blessed with two of them. Losing her babies is extremely devastating to her and (everyone) who knew and loved these girls."

"We are setting up this GoFundMe page to raise money to help with funeral costs, and other costs as the mother is not able to return to work right away, as she just lost her two kids. She has three other kids that she needs to be there for and take care of them. Donations and prayers will be greatly appreciated as we try to wrap our heads around losing these special, beautiful little girls."

Kramer clarified that she is taking time off right now in light of the incident, but does have a full-time job to return to as she's able.

Castonguay said that in their minds they are all family and that it has never mattered to them whether they were blood-related or not.

"It is so hard," Castonguay said.

Both Kramer and Elton want to support each other following the tragedy.

"Amber says 'I don't want your mom having to take on so much pain and do too much at the funeral,' my mom says 'I need to be strong for Amber and not have her do this alone, I'm her only mom,'" Castonguay said.

Annalise Braught is a photographer and editor at the Pioneer. Readers can reach her at (218) 333-9796 or abraught@bemidjipioneer.com.



Charred debris is all that remains of a home on Pony Lake Road on Friday after a fire broke out there on Thursday morning.

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