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Be prepared with escape plan, practice

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HUNTSVILLE, Ala. -- It only takes a few seconds for a fire to destroy everything you own but if you have an escape plan, your most cherished “possessions” — your family — will survive to tell the story.

Just ask Walter Zange, a safety and occupational health specialist in the Environmental and Munitions Center of Expertise (EM-CX), U.S. Army Engineering and Support Center, who lost the majority of his family’s possessions in a devastating house fire in September. An electrical short in an unused electrical outlet in the living room most likely caused a spark and caught the couch, curtains and wall on fire. Zange’s wife Shirley and soon to be 4-year-old daughter Elizabeth were upstairs on the third floor of the house when the smoke detector went off.

Fortunately, because Zange had an escape plan his wife and daughter escaped unharmed.

“You have to have an escape plan and you have to practice it,” Zange said. “I bought a fire ladder about five, six months ago and checked all the smoke detectors. Two of the three smoke detectors didn’t work so I replaced the batteries. If the smoke detector hadn’t been working in the living room, by the time the smoke reached the bathroom where my wife was, it could have easily been too late.”

He stressed that just having the ladder and smoke detectors aren’t enough. It is important to practice different scenarios — to have multiple plans for different situations. The family had a plan that could apply if everyone was home and they had a plan for the times Zange might not be home. It just so happened Zange was at work and his 6-year-old son Walter was at school when the fire occurred.

It is also important to know how everyone will react in a time of crisis.

“You have to find out if someone is going to freeze up on the ladder. My wife is terrified of heights so I had to coach her into getting onto that ladder when we practiced. If someone can’t do it, you have to figure out another way to get them out of the house. The children also have to know exactly what to do,” Zange said. “One night after the children went to bed, I set off the smoke detector and we practiced. We actually went down the fire ladder, down the side of the house. My daughter did exactly what she was supposed to do when this happened. As soon as she got down she went straight to the mailbox and waited for her mom.”

Zange reiterated several key points in developing an escape plan and in preparing for such an event. He said finding the correct window for the fire ladder is very important. It should be hung from a window above a flat, straight portion of the house because it is very difficult to climb out over a garage. If you have small children keep a good, strong rope with the ladder so that you can tie the rope around their waist to either lower them down or as

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