

'Every Mother's Worst Nightmare' | Guest Column by Lori Gates

AUGUST 2, 2011 · 11:09 AM

The phone rings in the middle of the night – every mother’s worst nightmare. You hear your son mumbling, his girlfriend crying and unfamiliar noises in the background. You feel fear, shock and confusion. Then you finally make out six words that stop your heart dead and send your world spinning: “Mom, my house is on fire.”

You hope it’s just a bad dream. This cannot be real. You do a reality check, rub your eyes and try to collect yourself. Then you realize: it’s true and your family is in danger.

That phone call will never leave my mind. The sound of panic is something no mother wants to hear from her child.

On July 19, someone with no heart, compassion, logic, or any other emotions that make you a good person, purposely set fire to my son’s home – while he and his girlfriend were asleep in it.

I want to thank the two young men, Matt and Will Morgan, who took matters into their own hands and saved my son Justyn, his girlfriend Breena and their baby dog Bella. You two are very brave, and in my eyes, nothing short of heroes. As Matt and Will were putting out the fire, another neighbor spotted the flames and called 911 – thank you!

It’s possible that this fire was not intended for Justyn and Breena. Regardless, they are victims of a crime that should not go unpunished.

According to [deputy fire marshal Paul Turner](#), my family would have died within the next two minutes. Justyn, born and raised here on the island, graduated from Orcas and has been a contributing member to the workforce since he was just 14. Breena just graduated as valedictorian. She is the one and only person to graduate through OASIS and receive scholarships. They plan to move to Bellingham in March to continue their education and experience the world. What a tragedy it would have been to have lost these two people who have so much potential.

I would also like to thank the fire department for their compassion and quick response. I saw firsthand how good you are at your jobs and how much you put yourselves at risk every time you respond. Thank you to the [Orcas Angels](#) for providing an anonymous place for my kids to sleep where they could regroup, relax and reflect.

To my kids: Believe me when I say, you are good kids! Yes, your lives have changed forever, but when things like this happen, it makes us stronger as individuals and stronger together. This is a good lesson learned – granted a very harsh lesson for a 19- and 21-year-old. I expect you will be checking people’s smoke detectors for the rest of your lives. I love you and appreciate you even more now, which I didn’t think was possible.

To the community: Please check your smoke detectors. If my kids’ detectors had been working, they would have been out of the house and aware of the situation much earlier. Remember, life can change in a matter of an instant – always be kindhearted, give as much love as you can, help others and be grateful for the moment you are living in. It could be gone in a heartbeat.

Lori Gates lives on Orcas Island.

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