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RIT students who died in fire remembered as achievers

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Staff writer

On a day when the Rochester Institute of Technology focused on its future, two students with their own destinies ahead of them lost their lives in a fire that consumed much of the city home they shared.

In the wee hours Friday before RIT was to inaugurate its president, a blaze swept wildly and rapidly through the home at 33 Upton Park, killing the two college students and injuring a third.

Killed in the fire were Seth Policzer, 21, of Parkland, Fla., a fourth-year computer engineering student, and Syed Ali Turab, 21, a fourth-year communications student from New Milford, N.J.

A third student, Michael DiCocco, was in guarded condition at Strong Memorial Hospital, according to a hospital spokeswoman. DiCocco, a fourth-year industrial design student from Canastota, Madison County, was rescued by firefighters, taken down a ladder from a second-floor window.

The tragedy darkened the day on which the RIT community inaugurated President William Døstler. The ceremony went on as planned Friday afternoon, but with a moment of silence for the dead students. A moment of silence also was observed Friday evening before the RIT hockey game at Ritter Arena.

"It's not completely inappropriate for the RIT community to get together today — to celebrate what RIT has become and to mourn the loss," Døstler said Friday at a news conference.

Both students achievers

In many ways, Policzer and Turab were the very type of students who have helped shape RIT into the recognized university it has become. Both were from out of state and found a welcoming atmosphere at the campus; both were academically oriented achievers, yet both enjoyed the friendships and joie de vivre that college offered beyond the classroom rigors. "He really loved the college experience," said Perinton resident Kevin Foody, a quality assurance manager at Blue Tie Inc., where Turab worked this past summer for college credit. "He liked hanging out with his friends. He liked going to class."

Turab's work at Blue Tie was so exemplary that the software company offered him a parttime job with a flexible schedule so he could return to RIT, Foody said. But Turab wanted to be on campus full time.

Policzer also carried a sturdy course load, participating in a five-year computer engineering program that leads to a bachelor's and master's degree with its culmination.

"Anybody who can get on the (five-year master's) track, that means their performance is really outstanding," said Kenneth Hsu, a computer engineering professor at RIT. "Industry likes that kind of graduate."

Father describes his son

Seth's parents, Dr. Joel Policzer and Madeleine Policzer, were perhaps the most surprised that their son transformed into the student he did.

"He always was the child we had to get to school at gunpoint," Joel Policzer said Friday in a telephone interview from his Florida home. "Then in the seventh grade he discovered computers."

Computers became his passion, though recently Seth did have some second thoughts about his career path, his father said. During a recent conversation, Seth said he might like to focus his future on biomedical engineering. "He said, 'I realize computers are very good, but I want to help people,'" said Policzer, who is originally from Auburn, Cayuga County.

Policzer has worked as an oncologist and is now nationally recognized for his work in palliative and end-of-life care. But that work did not brace him for Friday's news, he said.

"It's different when it's your own," he said.

Though miles from RIT, the home at 33 Upton Park is the sort of location favored by college students — within the Neighborhood of the Arts and close to the liveliness of Park Avenue and the East End.

Apparently, five RIT students lived in the rental home; a sixth person was visiting when the fire broke out Friday morning.

The firefighters' view

The first call of a fire at the home came in about 2:40 a.m., and within minutes firefighters were at the scene. Three people had managed to escape; two of them leapt from a porch onto the hood of a car in the driveway. While anxious and distraught, the three were able to tell firefighters where the others might be trapped inside, said fire Capt. Kenneth Gippe. In interviews Friday, the firefighters portrayed the next few minutes as a time that put their training to the test. Realizing that some of the students inside were on the second floor, they carried a 24-foot extension ladder to the rear and laid it upon a second-floor window.

At first, the rear of the house showed only some signs of smoke. But by the time the first firefighter had scaled the ladder, the flames were dancing dangerously from the windows.

In an episode more typical of a Hollywood script, the two firefighters who broke out the window and climbed through were 19-year veteran Dan Caufield, the brother of Fire Chief John Caufield, and probationary firefighter Guy Higgins, on the job for only nine months.

"The visibility was pretty much zero," Caufield said. He went to the right, and Higgins went to the left. Inside a bedroom, Higgins found DiCocco on the floor and yelled for Caufield. The two lifted the unconscious student to other firefighters, who carried him down.

Before the Upton Park fire, Higgins had helped hose out blazes but had not waded into a situation as dire as what he confronted Friday.

"It was a lot of great communication (between firefighters)," he said, admitting that he slept little before returning to the Monroe Avenue station Friday evening for his next shift. "You play it over in your mind all day."

The thick smoke was so dense and the heat so intense that the firefighters could not pull Turab and Policzer to safety in time.

Deputy Fire Chief Bill Curran said one victim was found on the first floor of the residence and another on the upper floor.

Craig DelGiorno, 19, lives next door to the Upton Park house and said he was awakened by the commotion.

"People were screaming; it was chaos," he said. "People were coming out of the building just collapsing. Guys were jumping off the roof. In a matter of minutes, the whole house was up."

DelGiorno said he and his landlord started breaking windows to help get the students out, but the fire prevented them from getting too far.

DelGiorno said he often hung out with the students who lived in the house. "They were fun-loving guys, never bothered anyone."

Hector Perez, 43, of Rochester said he was watching television at his girlfriend's nearby apartment when he smelled smoke.

"It was almost like a dream, like not real," he said. "They was all good kids. They didn't bother nobody. I feel bad for them."

Firefighters had the blaze under control in about 20 minutes. According to firefighters on the scene, it appeared that the fire started in a first-floor bedroom. The cause is still unknown.

"Three got out with the smoke alarm. We do not know what happened with the other three yet," Curran said. "This is too early in the time frame to be speculating what happened."

Caufield said the working smoke alarm helped saved lives.

Early Friday an e-mail reminder went out to RIT staff members, reminding them that "today's the day" — the inauguration of its ninth president. Shortly after, another e-mail broke the news of the deaths.

RIT made grief counseling available to relatives and friends of the students, as well as to students on campus.

"We have full counseling services available," Destler said Friday. "We can provide counseling services to students who were friends of these students or colleagues and try to help them through this difficult time."

Friends in disbelief

Yousuf Khan recalled when he saw Turab on Thursday. They discussed weekend plans.

For both technical communications majors, the plans involved a lot of studying and getting ready for finals week.

"We were both talking about how stressed out we were about school, and Ali had to give a presentation for his quantitative research methods class Monday," said Khan, 25, of Rochester. "When I heard about a fire on Upton Street and I knew Ali lived there, I thought, no, it can't be him."

For friends of Policzer, there was also disbelief.

Rabbi Paul Plotkin of Temple Beth Am in Margate, Fla., where the Policzer family attended synagogue, presided over Seth Policzer's bar mitzvah. He said that at RIT, Seth Policzer "fully blossomed into an intelligent, socially active, independent and mature man who has a brilliant career ahead of him."

The tragedy will always be inexplicable, Plotkin said.

"One thing you can't do is ask why," he said. "For one, you will never find an answer. And two, you will only make yourself sick mentally. You can't find significance in death, but only in the life."

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