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Fire victims were fixture on their Lowell block

By **Laura Crimaldi and Claire McNeill** | GLOBE STAFF | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 11, 2014



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LOWELL — On Branch Street, Torn Sak was a fixture, the guy whose daily routine was so well known that neighbors can tell you what time he dropped his partner off at work and when he picked up his children from school.

“I’m shocked that he’s gone,” said Jose Antonio Rosado, who lives across the street from where Sak and his longtime partner died in an early-morning apartment building fire Thursday that also took the lives of three of their children, a woman who might have been trying to save her dogs, and an older man.

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Officials did not release the names of those who were killed in the fire, but Thearan Sak, 20, identified five of the victims as his brother, Torn, Torn’s partner, Ellen Vuong, and three of the couple’s children, Anthony Sak, 12, Ryan Sak, 9, and Sayuri Sak, 7.

“He’s a family man. He loved his kids. He loved his wife,” Sak said of his older brother. “My family, they live in a bad neighborhood, but they are not bad people.”

Sak said two more of the couple’s children, boys ages 14 and 11, escaped from the family’s third-floor apartment, along with their grandfather and a roommate.

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The family had celebrated Sayuri's seventh birthday with fireworks just days before.

"It's sad to see my brother and his family go out like that," Sak said. "I'm trying to be strong for my family."

Neighbors said they knew Torn Sak by his nickname, Tony, and said he was a memorable presence in the neighborhood with his long beard and husky physique.

Rosado, 43, said Torn Sak drove Vuong to her job at Hannaford supermarket in Tewksbury every day at 7 a.m., then returned home to take care of their children.

Thearan Sak said his brother did not work because he could not read well. He said Vuong "worked her way up from the bottom" to become a grocery manager. "She was a hard worker," Sak said.

Vuong was also known for her love of cooking and her affection for her children.

"She loved her kids to death," said Shawn Nash, 29, a friend.

Neighbors said the couple's children are known for going straight home after school and doing their homework.

"He wouldn't let his kids go on the bus," Rosado said. "He would drop them off himself and pick them up at 2:30."

In the evenings, Torn Sak and his children could be seen walking a Chihuahua down Branch Street, said Tony Nuth, a neighbor.

"They're just normal kids," Nuth said.

The family had escaped a fire in the same apartment building once before, Rosado said, adding that Torn Sak was troubled by that blaze. A minor electrical fire started in a liquor store on the building's first floor last July,

city officials said.

“I says: ‘That’s screwed up. Something could have happened to your kids, man,’ ” Rosado recalled.

He later said he was stunned by his friend’s death.

It’s “a tragedy to me that he’s gone,” he said.

Late Thursday morning, after the fire was extinguished, Bobby Christakos, 54, paced around the remnants of the apartment building where he said his niece, Tina Christakos, died. He had rushed to the scene as soon as he learned that the building was on fire.

“It’s just a tragedy,” Christakos said. “Thirty-eight years old, that’s too young.”

Tina Christakos’ boyfriend, Chin Bun, 41, said she might have been trying to save their Chihuahuas from the flames or to help another third-floor resident, and that is why she didn’t escape.

The dogs, he said, were like children to the couple.

Bobby Christakos said his niece had a job working with children and leaves a 22-year-old daughter.

“She loved her daughter, and she took care of her daughter,” Christakos said. “She helped out people. She helped a lot of people and never had anything bad to say about anybody.”

Tina Christakos’ daughter, Felicia Neov, said her mother was someone who “liked to enjoy her life, liked to help people.”

Bobby Christakos said he worries for Tina’s mother.

“She’s in her own world right now,” he said. “I think this is going to break her.”

Christakos said he is also troubled about how his niece’s life came to an end.

“I just hope the smoke got to her first. If she burned, I just don’t know,” he said.

Neighbors have provided a name for the seventh victim, a man believed to be in his 70s, but his relatives could not be reached Thursday to confirm his identity.

Vaen Phoeun, 54, who said he was the older man’s roommate, described him as a “good guy” who just celebrated the birth of a granddaughter a month or two ago.

Winters Otero, 56, said the man used to work in construction and always wore his gray hair in a braided ponytail.

“He’s kind of an old, friendly guy,” Otero said.

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