

When: October 11, 2008, at around 6:30 a.m.

Where: 401 West 18th Street in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, the 7th-floor apartment of the Balbuena family.

Firefighters arrived within four minutes of a 911 call. While some battled flames that engulfed the kitchen and spread to a living room and long hallway, others breathing with air packs rushed into the 20-foot hallway and the three bedrooms and bathroom at the back of the apartment.

In the bathroom, they found the mother, Delkis Balbuena, 34, with her 8-year-old daughter, Nanny Joa Balbuena, in a bathtub filled with water, where they had apparently tried to seek refuge. A 3-year-old girl, Bet-el Joa Balbuena, was also found in the bathroom, under a sink.

And lying on the floor in a small bedroom at the back, huddled under bunk beds near a window, firefighters found the 40-year-old father, Maschay Joa Valdez, with his 15-month-old daughter, Ruth Joa Balbuena, and his 10-year-old son, whose name was not released, but who was identified by one law enforcement official as Jonzan Joa Balbuena.

"It was not a big bedroom," Deputy Fire Chief James Daly said. "They were definitely trying to make their way out."

Witnesses said the victims were unconscious when firefighters brought them out of the building.

"The firemen were giving them CPR, but that wasn't helping. The kids weren't breathing." Smoke inhalation injured and killed them.

A 10-year-old boy, the only survivor of the fire, was transferred from St. Vincent's Hospital in Manhattan to Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx, where he was pronounced brain dead. (Jacobi has a hyperbaric chamber that treats victims of smoke poisoning by increasing the oxygen flow to body tissues.)

Contributing to the fire:

1. The place where the fire began and layout of the apartment contributed to the deadliness of the fire. The only door opened onto a small foyer, with the kitchen to the left and a living room to the right. Beyond those rooms, a long hallway leads to three bedrooms and the apartment's only bathroom at the back.

Fire officials said a long hallway in the apartment acted like a chimney, drawing smoke from the kitchen—which was near the front door—into the living quarters in the rear. "It was intense heat that trapped the family in the back," said Deputy Chief James Daly.

The fire quickly engulfed the kitchen and spread to the living room, blocking the exit,

Chief Daly said. "That fire didn't allow them to get past the door," he added. "They were trapped in the rear."

As smoke filled the rooms and flames spread, the family apparently retreated along the hallway to the back of the apartment. "That narrow hallway is now basically a chimney that they're trying to get down, and they can't," Chief Daly said.

Recommended was for them to shut the bedroom doors and use wet towels to cover the openings at the bottoms of the doors, and wait for rescue by firefighters.

2. Smoke detector disabled. The apartment's partially melted smoke detector had been doubly disabled. It should have been wired into the building's electrical system and had a battery backup. The battery had been removed and the wires disconnected, the Fire Department said. A working smoke detector might have saved six.

Comment:

Make sure you have working smoke detectors—press that "test" button.



Press the "test" button and make sure your smoke detectors work (and keep them working!).

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FILE THIS STORY UNDER REALLY DUMB STUFF PEOPLE DO

The date: September 8, 2008; the time: about 8:00 at night.

Jose Silva, age 43, of White Plains, Westchester County, New York, was driving his son and nephew in his 2004 Saturn and following his G.P.S.-based navigation system. It told Silva to turn right, so he turned right. Right on to Metro-North railroad tracks.

Now you know this wouldn't be much of a "Dumb Stuff People Do" accident story if Silva's car didn't get stuck on the train tracks, which it did. Fortunately, Silva and his passengers fled his car before it got hit by a Metro North commuter train, which stranded some 400 passengers for hours. Thankfully, no one on the train was injured.

Some interesting asides:

1. Authorities gave Silva three summonses, claiming he had adequate warning of the presence of the train tracks.
2. Silva claimed that some seven minutes passed before the train crushed his automobile, and that he had called "911" to try to stop any trains. Metro-North said that Silva might have had a chance if he had dialed an MTA hotline number posted at the intersection—888-MTA911PD, which would have cut steps out of the train-stopping process. (One wonders if an all-numeric telephone number might make more sense.)
3. The same kind of car accident occurred on January 2, when a different driver, Bo Bai of Sunnyvale, California, made the same turn in a rental car at the direction of the in-car navigation system. He was not hurt in that incident, but was also ticketed for blocking the Metro-North tracks.



Gary says:

The moral of this story is, I guess, don't blindly follow your navigation system—but why should I even need to say this?



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