

OFFICER OF THE YEAR
WESTLAND POLICE OFFICERS ROBERT FRUIT AND KAMERON SLEEP;
WESTLAND POLICE SGT. NORMAN BROOKS

Many people suffer the recurring nightmare of fire breaking out in their home as they sleep. Now think about how much greater that terror must be for a paralyzed senior citizen who can do little but scream for help as flames and smoke engulf her.

That's exactly the situation greeting Westland police officers working the midnight shift last Dec. 18.

Just before 2:30 a.m., dispatch sent officers to a blazing single-story home where an elderly paralyzed woman was trapped inside. Officers Robert Fruit and Kameron Sleep hit the scene first, with Sgt. Norman Brooks right behind them.

When the officers arrived — ahead of the fire department — a breathless neighbor told the officers that he had made several forays into the home but was unable to locate the trapped woman amid the thick smoke.

The woman's husband stood just outside the house. His paralyzed wife, he told them, lay on a bed in the northwest corner of the living room, unable to move.

Without hesitation, Officers Fruit and Sleep charged into the house. Although they could hear the woman pleading for help, the billowing smoke overcame them, driving them outside, gasping for breath.

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WESTLAND/222

Within minutes, however, Fruit and Sleep — with Brooks now at their side — were back inside the house. With no time to spare, they crawled to the terrified woman, lifted her from her bed and carried her outside to safety.

Several minutes after their heroic rescue, the fire department arrived, extinguished the fire and examined the woman, her husband and the neighbor who had attempted the rescue. All three were hospitalized but soon recovered. The three officers were treated at the scene for smoke inhalation but declined additional medical attention.

Later investigation found that the couple's grandson and his girlfriend were in the basement with their infant son when the fire started. They had been burning candles and erroneously thought they'd extinguished all of them. The grandson had awakened to crackling flames, rushed his girlfriend and their son from the house and alerted his grandfather on his way out.

Westland Police Officer Robert Fruit, Officer Kameron Sleep and Sgt. Norman Brooks demonstrated selfless courage in entering a blazing home to rescue a helpless woman, who would probably not be alive today without their swift and brave actions.

We honor their lifesaving heroism by presenting them with the 2012 Police Officers Association of Michigan Officer of the Year Award.

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OFFICER OF THE YEAR
WASHTENAW COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPUTY JOSEPH BALLARD

The saying goes that no one dies of a broken heart. But without the quick actions of Washtenaw County Sheriff's Deputy Joseph Ballard last summer, a romantic breakup might well have cost a distraught man his life.

The incident began just before 8 p.m. Aug. 2 when Deputy Ballard answered a call about an unidentified man who was lying beside the road waving for help near the Huron River in Scio Township northwest of Ann Arbor.

Ballard arrived quickly, visually scanning the roadside and the riverbank. He saw no one. Driving down the road, however, he spotted a vehicle parked on the shoulder. The driver told Ballard that he had seen a man sitting about 20 yards off the road near a bridge over the river. The man, now nowhere to be seen, had told the driver that he wanted to die because his girlfriend had just broken up with him.

Ballard parked his vehicle, reported to dispatch and began walking toward the spot where the driver last saw the man. On the way, he picked up a backpack and cell phone — and then continued toward the water.

Suddenly he heard screams coming from the direction of the river. But when Ballard reached the water, the screams stopped, and he saw nothing unusual.

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WASHTENAW COUNTY/222

Retracing his path through the woods, Ballard returned to his patrol vehicle, updated medical personnel who had just arrived and then sifted through the backpack. In one pocket, he found a pill bottle with a man's name on it.

Resuming his search, Deputy Ballard this time took a different path through the woods down to the river where he spotted the head of a white male emerging from the water about 50 feet from shore.

The man struggled to keep his head above water — then disappeared beneath the surface. The head resurfaced. But by this time, the strong current had taken him even farther downstream and away from Ballard with a small island between them.

Although the water between Ballard and the island was only about waist deep, the deputy recognized that the strong current presented a serious challenge.

Despite the risk, Ballard removed his bulletproof vest and duty belt, and walked into the river. Arduously, he fought his way across 20 feet of rapidly moving water to an island that would bring him closer to the drowning man, who had again submerged and re-emerged, desperately gasping for air.

Barely pausing to catch his breath once he reached the island, Ballard swam another 15 feet to the drowning man, secured him and managed to pull him back to the island, battling the swift current all the way.

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WASHTENAW COUNTY/333

When the two reached the island, the rescued man was unresponsive but still breathing. Ballard radioed dispatch and returned his full attention to the man, who was now coughing up river water but still unresponsive. Suddenly, the man stopped breathing.

With no time to waste, Ballard rolled the man onto his side, hoping to clear any additional water from his body. The man released a loud breath — and then began breathing on his own.

Meanwhile, Washtenaw County Sheriff's Deputy Keith Flores had arrived on the scene, waded to the island and helped carry the man back across the water and onto the shore where an ambulance rushed him to the hospital.

Deputy Ballard stopped home, changed into a dry uniform and returned to work — where he soon apprehended a man who had just fled from the Michigan State Police after crashing on I-94.

"It was a busy night," Ballard observed afterwards.

Two months later, Deputy Ballard answered a call about a disorderly and intoxicated man at a homeless camp. When he arrived, he saw that the unruly drunk man was none other than man whose life he'd saved.

"Do you know me?" Ballard asked when the inebriated man began swearing and calling him names.

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WASHTENAW COUNTY/444

The man said he had no idea who Deputy Ballard was. But, when Ballard explained he was the deputy who had rescued him from the river, the man calmed down, apologized and thanked Ballard for risking his life to save him.

Washtenaw County Sheriff's Deputy Joseph Ballard has demonstrated remarkable heroism and is a living example of the selflessness people expect of first responders. The POAM proudly presents Deputy Ballard with a well-deserved 2012 Police Officer of the Year Award.

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