



## From the smoke rose a hero

By BRIAN WALKER/Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, September 10, 2016 12:00 am

When John Ward saw Valerie Yates' hand appear from smoke pouring out of her Rathdrum home his instincts went into overdrive.

"That's when I dove in on my belly, grabbed her and slid her out," said Ward, an advanced EMT for Kootenai County Fire and Rescue who was off duty when he became a hero to his neighbors during the April 13, 2015, fire that destroyed the Yates' home.

Ward's actions were recognized when he received a Medal of Honor during a ceremony in Boise on Friday "for conspicuous gallantry and exceptionally meritorious conduct at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty."

"It's a huge honor," Ward said. "Not many people earn the award, so I was shocked when I found out about it. I'm very honored to be selected and joining a small fraternity."

Fifty-two other emergency personnel, including firefighters, law enforcement and medical responders, have received the honor from the state's Medal of Honor Commission since 2006. There were 11 fire personnel previously honored.

Attorney General Lawrence Wasden presented Ward with the award.

"There is no better way to recognize and express our appreciation for the valor, courage and bravery shown by our firefighters than the Medal of Honor," said Wasden, chairman of the Medal of Honor Commission.

During the Rathdrum fire, Ward crawled into the house under the hot smoke without fire protection gear, reached Yates and pulled her out.

"His decision to enter a structure fire to rescue his neighbor was at great peril to his own life," KCFR Chief Warren Merritt said.

Ward began his firefighting career in 1994 and was promoted to lieutenant in 2000 with the Post Falls Fire District prior to the district's consolidation that created KCFR in 2001.

"His experience as a firefighter and officer prepared him for his day-to-day arduous tasks and was no doubt a foundation and part of his decision making paradigm that assisted in rescuing the trapped victim," Merritt said.

Ward also saved a dog and two cats during the fire.

"Through indomitable courage, complete disregard for his own safety and profound concern for the victim, Lt. Ward showed great determination and thoroughness," the award states.



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**CONTINUED** — Ward said that he and his wife had just returned home from a bicycle ride when he heard screaming next door.

"When I looked out the window, I immediately knew (the house was on fire)," he said.

Yates' husband Richard and daughter Sharon told Ward that Valerie, who was in a wheelchair, was inside. Valerie had fallen off wheelchair and was crawling on the floor inside.

"The situation did not look like she'd be a survivor," Ward said.

Ward estimates the house became engulfed in flames about 30 seconds after he pulled Valerie from the smoke.

In an earlier interview with The Press, Valerie and Sharon said Ward saved Valerie's life.

"If it wasn't for him, my mother would be dead," Sharon said.

Due to the extensive amount of damage, no cause of the fire was determined, said Northern Lakes Fire Chief Pat Riley.

Idaho Falls Firefighter Sean Allen, who was part of a team responsible for rescuing a motorist who had crashed and overturned his vehicle in an Idaho Falls irrigation canal on Sept. 25, 2015, also received a Medal of Honor on Friday.

Ward previously received the EMT of the Quarter from Kootenai County EMS and a Lifesaving Award from KCFR for his actions. He also received a Hometown Hero Award from the American Red Cross. His story will also be featured in Firehouse, a national firefighting trade magazine.

The Yateses have since had a new home built on the Main Street property where their former home was destroyed.

Ward said the terrifying incident still remains a conversation piece among the neighbors.

"There's definitely a bond there that makes use closer than before," Ward said. "They're always expressing their gratitude for how things went that night."

Ward said he simply did what his instincts dictated.

"I just did the right thing and was in the right place at the right time," he said.