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# After Rescuing Woman From Fire, a Mayor Recalls His Fear and Focus

By **JAMES BARRON**

There was a moment, Mayor Cory A. Booker of Newark said Friday, when he “thought we were not going to make it.”

“No air,” he said. “I just could not breathe. That’s when I thought, if I don’t find this woman in a few minutes, we’re both going to die.”

Less than 12 hours earlier, Mr. Booker had run into a burning house on his street and carried a woman to safety, but only after arguing with a police detective assigned to protect him who tried to restrain him and even reached out and grabbed his belt. “It was just one of these moments in life when you just decide to jump in,” the mayor said.

Mr. Booker has had other moments in life when he had jumped in, and he has not hesitated to talk about them — or, late Thursday night, to send out a message alerting his Twitter followers. There was the time when a teenager was hit by gunfire and died in his arms. There was the time when a drug dealer named T-Bone threatened to kill him. Later on, T-Bone broke into tears as he asked Mr. Booker for help in getting his life on track. And, as mayor, he is known, according to several people who have worked with him, for keeping an ear tuned to the police scanner in his security detail.

Mr. Booker was treated for smoke inhalation after collapsing on the lawn outside in a coughing fit. He said at a news conference in front of the burned-out building in his Upper Clinton Hill neighborhood on Friday morning that he also had second-degree burns on his hands.

“I’m going to be fine,” he said.

Having survived, Mr. Booker framed his experience with the fire in religious terms. “I feel a sense of gratitude today to God that I’m here,” said the mayor, who has been in office since 2006. “I had my proverbial come-to-Jesus moment in my life.”

Mr. Booker said one of the detectives riding with him saw the flames first and called the dispatcher about 10 p.m., then knocked on a window. The detective, Santos Duran, compared the situation to “a scene from the movie ‘Backdraft.’”

Some people inside did not realize the two-story house was on fire. Coley Whitaker, a retired truck driver who lived in the building and was asleep, said he had been awakened by a voice shouting that there was a fire — the mayor’s voice.

Mr. Whitaker said that the blaze was in the kitchen upstairs and that he tried to put it out before the mayor went up. But water just seemed to make it worse, he said. Lamar Hodge, who was downstairs, said he heard his sister, Zina, screaming for help from upstairs, beyond the kitchen. Detective Alex Rodriguez, who has been on the mayor’s security detail since last June, said he went to the second floor with Mr. Booker right behind.

They, too, heard Ms. Hodge’s yelling. Detective Rodriguez said the flames had scaled the wall and were fanning across the ceiling, and they could hear what he described as small explosions.

Mr. Booker moved toward the kitchen. Detective Rodriguez said that he held him back and that the two “exchanged words.”

“I said: ‘I can’t let you in, that’s my job. I have to keep you from danger,’” the detective recalled.

Mr. Booker tried to charge into the flames a second time, the detective said, and he again restrained the mayor, this time by grabbing his belt. The two again had words, Detective Rodriguez said, and this time, Mr. Booker laid out the situation in no uncertain terms.

“He gave me an order, and I complied,” Detective Rodriguez said. “The order was, ‘Let me go.’”

In the back room, the mayor said, the smoke was so thick he “couldn’t see anything,” and he was “frightened” because he could not find Ms. Hodge at first. Once he did, he said, he lifted her over a shoulder “and ran as quickly as I could through the kitchen, which was on fire, and to Rodriguez, who assisted me in taking her out of the house.”

There, Detective Rodriguez said, Mr. Booker started coughing and collapsed. The mayor and Ms. Hodge were taken to a hospital; the mayor was released a short time later. Ms. Hodge’s mother, Jacqueline Williams, said her daughter would probably go home from the hospital on Saturday.

In his news conference, the mayor played down the idea that he had been a hero.

“I’m a neighbor who did what most neighbors would do, which is jump into action,” he said, adding, with a nod to Detective Rodriguez: “I think most people would have done the exact same thing. The only difference is I had to convince somebody to let me go who was doing his job to protect me.”

*David W. Chen, Christopher Reeve and Nate Schweber contributed reporting.*