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My name is Richelle Risdon and I work as a Public Education and Information Officer with Monroe Fire District #3. I am opposed to removing the fire sprinkler requirement in the IRC because I want to see a statewide requirement.

The National Association of Home Builders did an excellent job in creating a website called [www.smokealarmswork.org](http://www.smokealarmswork.org).  The site offers helpful and relevant information regarding smoke alarms and how effective they are when installed and working properly to warn of fire.  The NAHB is correct when they say that Americans are safer from fire now than they have ever been.  Back in the 1970’s when the widespread use of smoke alarms began there were over 6,000 residential fire deaths every year (1977). Today, despite public education efforts and 95% of homes with installed smoke alarms, there are still almost 3,000 people who die every year in house fires. That is way too many people dying needlessly every year. I would bet that if you were to talk to any parent who has lost a child in a fire, they would tell you that the relatively low cost of a sprinkler system is nothing and that if there is something we can do to prevent another family from experiencing tragedy, we should do it.

For those who say that smoke alarms are enough, here are the facts according to the Sept 2009 NFPA report (based on data from the U.S. Fire Administration and the National Fire Incident Reporting System):

Almost all households in the U.S. have at least one smoke alarm, yet in 2003-2006, smoke alarms were present in only 69% of all reported home fires.  Smoke alarms operated correctly in only 47% of these reported home fires. 40% of all home fire deaths resulted from fires in homes with no smoke alarms while 23% resulted from homes in which smoke alarms were present but did not operate. 37% of home fire deaths happened in homes with a working smoke alarm.  We can do better with fire sprinklers and I feel we are obligated to do so. It’s not that people are careless or bad in some way because they don’t keep their smoke alarms working or install them at all….people just don’t realize the devastation a fire can bring to their lives.  Smoke alarms and fire safety simply aren’t a priority until you have experienced a fire. Even with the best intentions, replacing a battery, checking an alarm, or installing one can be easily forgotten.

Back in December of 1990, I was 13 years old and the Seattle area experienced a huge snow storm. I lived on the Sammamish Plateau and decided to catch the bus as far as it would go after school. My friend Rachel and I walked the rest of the way in the freezing cold and pushing snow with our shins.  My brother was trapped at his elementary school as the busses could not move in the weather. The kids were going to spend the night in the gym. My sister was to spend the night at the daycare. Parents at work in Seattle and surrounding communities were told on the news and radio not to even bother trying to drive home and that everyone should stay put.  The average commute from Seattle to Redmond was averaging three hours if you didn’t get stuck in the snow.  Both of my parents decided to stay the night at their offices, my mom in Redmond and dad in Seattle.

My friend Rachel and I decided we were going to spend the night at my house.  We played in the snow and rode quads up and down our driveway all afternoon.  Later that night, we lit a fire in the family room.  The power was out so we had no heat and no light. We got out every blanket we could find, every flashlight, and every candle.  That night, we had a disagreement as to where we should sleep—Rachel wanted to sleep upstairs in my bedroom, but I wanted to sleep downstairs on the floor next to the fireplace.  I ultimately convinced her we should sleep downstairs on the floor next to the fire. It was absolutely freezing that night.

I think it was around 3:30 in the morning when my mom woke me up by screaming in my ear: Fire! Fire! Get up!  I woke up to a house filled with black smoke. I could hardly see a thing and I felt like I was choking. My dad was fighting the flames with fire extinguishers and water in the next room. The flames had crawled up the wall, the ceiling, and were headed toward our Christmas tree. My dad sent me up to my bedroom to open the windows to ventilate the house. As I held my breath to open the window I realized if we had slept in that room we would be dead (the smoke was extremely thick upstairs).

That night, my parents came home simply by chance.  My dad left his work in Seattle telling one of his co-workers in the middle of the night, “I’m going to try to make it home….I just have a bad feeling.”  It took him at least a couple of hours to get home to Sammamish. He stopped in Redmond to pick up my mom from her office.  When they finally approached the house after plowing through the long, snow covered driveway, they saw flames coming from the front window of the house (this was the living room).  They ran inside to try to find me. When they did find Rachel and I asleep downstairs on the floor in the family room, the smoke had settled a couple of inches from our noses and was still banking down.

Earlier that night I had lit candles for lighting in the front living room. I forgot to blow them out before I went to bed. The candle wax had melted onto the mantle of that fireplace, catching it and the wall on fire.  The smoke alarms were hard wired and the power was out.  This is just one of the smoke alarms mistakes that many families make.  A fire can double in size every minute with flashover (where everything in the room ignites) in about three minutes….. and the smoke can kill you in a very short amount of time.  This tells me that I should be dead. I am only here because my dad had a bad feeling and decided to drive home in the middle of the night.

We spent the days just before Christmas in a hotel room. Our clothes were ruined. I had destroyed my mom’s antique mirror. The house had to be cleaned and repaired.  Looking back now, as a mom, I realize how scared my parents must have been to drive up to a burning house.  I want fire sprinklers in every home. I want to know that another family doesn’t have to rely on dad’s intuition.  If my parents had not come home that night, I would probably be dead. The only thing that could have saved Rachel and I would have been waking up on our own or a residential sprinkler system which would have stopped the fire in the room of origin.  I got lucky that night but there are way too many people out there who were not so lucky. There are way too many children, adults, people with disabilities who have died in fires….many of whom could have been saved with a home fire sprinkler system installed.

Home fire sprinklers extinguish or slow the growth of fire, giving people more time to get out or be rescued. If you have a fire in your home, your risk of dying decreases by about 80% when sprinklers are present.  Had my parents not come home that night and we had a sprinkler system, there is about an 80% chance that I would have still lived.  Without them coming home, without working smoke alarms, and without a sprinkler system, the odds were stacked greatly against me.  And I was just a kid.

Nowadays, I have the displeasure of standing in front of TV cameras and telling the public, the neighbors that another person has died in a fire. I don’t want to ever get in front of another TV camera knowing we could have done more. I don’t want to tell people that another newborn baby like the one we had a few months ago in Monroe, lay helplessly as flames burned her body. I don’t want another mother to have to go through the kind of agony that the baby’s mother did when she was told her baby Nancy had died. We can do better than that.