

## **Fatal Fire Inquest**

***The Sudbury Star***

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*August 13, 2002*

The opening day of a coroner's inquest into a tragic house fire in Valley East shed light on the heroism of a great-grandmother whose love for two young children was stronger than her fear of death.

Pearl Shaw could easily have saved herself from the deadly smoke and flames that consumed a home on Roy Street in Hanmer on April 22, 2001.

Instead, the 75-year-old fought to her last breath to rescue her beloved great-grandchildren, Asha-Jade McLean, 3, and Ellias McLean,

"She was a great woman. She was the most strong-willed person I ever met," said Shaw's granddaughter Bobbi McLean, mother of Asha-Jade and Ellias.

On that fateful Sunday in April 2001, Bobbi McLean was visiting a friend in Sudbury. Her children were at home in Hanmer, in the care of their great-grandmother.

When fire broke out shortly after noon, neighbours rushed to the house, worried someone might be trapped inside.

The first to arrive were next-door neighbours Doug and Carole Croteau, who were the first two witnesses to testify Monday at the coroner's inquest.

The Croteaus told the inquest jury how they saw Pearl Shaw, disoriented and shaken, exit the burning house from the front door. Before either of them could react, Shaw darted back into the home, after realizing her great-grandchildren were still inside.

At that point, Doug Croteau attempted to follow Shaw into the house. A towering, blue-collar worker, Croteau was immediately overcome and pushed back by the thick, toxic smoke.

Other neighbours, as well as a firefighter, also made several attempts to enter the house, at one point hearing the cries of young Ellias and Asha-Jade from inside. All were repelled by the lethal smoke.

Incredibly, as the inquest jury will hear in greater detail at some point in the process, Pearl Shaw somehow made her way from the front door of the home, through the living room, down a hall and into a bedroom where her great-grandchildren were trapped.

Investigators later found the three victims in the basement, where they fell as the burning main floor of the home collapsed. The bodies were together, apparently because Shaw had managed to reach her grandchildren and huddle with them in their final moments.

Bobbi McLean said Monday she was not surprised by her grandmother's valiant, superhuman effort to save her children.

"She may have been 75, but she could do anything," McLean said. "She was a very strong and courageous woman. And I just thank God she was there for my kids."