

"I knocked on the window to get her attention. I yelled, 'The car's on fire!'"

Neil Oldaker, who pulled a woman from her burning car at restaurant

HEROISM SERVED AT DRIVE-THROUGH



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Vancouver firefighters provide an initial attack on a fire at the Rose Village McDonald's just after 11 a.m. Wednesday. The fire caused \$1 million in damage.

Man pulls woman, 80, from burning vehicle at McDonald's

By LAURA MCVICKER and BOB ALBRECHT
Columbian staff writers

Neil Oldaker was in the McDonald's restaurant drive-through when he saw flames under the white sedan in front of his truck.

The flames were quickly moving up the sides of the car. But the driver, waiting to get her food at the window, didn't seem to notice. So Oldaker swung into action.

"I knocked on the window to get her attention. I yelled, 'The car's on fire!' But she seemed confused," he said.

So Oldaker dragged the 80-year-old woman from the car just as flames spread to the McDonald's restaurant, ripping through the kitchen and gutting the building's interior.

Wednesday's lunchtime blaze caused \$1 million in damage to the McDonald's, forced a daylong evacuation of the restaurant and snarled traffic around Fourth Plain Boulevard for hours. Fortunately, no one, including the driver of the sedan, was seriously hurt.

The fire at the restaurant at 2110 E. Fourth Plain

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Neil Oldaker, center, checks the condition of a woman he pulled from a burning sedan at the McDonald's drive-through Wednesday. The restaurant, at 2110 E. Fourth Plain Blvd., was gutted.



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

McDonald's employees console each other after the restaurant at the intersection of Fourth Plain Boulevard and Fort Vancouver Way was severely damaged in a fire.

Fire:

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Bldv. was reported at 11:08 a.m. by a McDonald's employee. The first engine arrived six minutes later, and firefighters saw a dark plume of smoke coming from the restaurant, said Vancouver Firefighter-spokesman Jim Flaherty.

Flames continued rising from the roof an hour later. That's when firefighters ripped off a metal lip that sealed the roof and gained direct access to still-smoldering embers.

Firefighters didn't leave the scene until 6 p.m. When they left, only two walls and the inside play area were intact.

An initial response was scaled back as battalion leaders expressed concern over firefighters' safety. "We tried the interior, we tried above and

we pulled crews out," Flaherty said.

Grease helped fuel the flames that concentrated in the space between the drop-down ceiling and the roof. Heavy black smoke filled the restaurant's play area.

Twelve employees evacuated. Two of them were transported by ambulance to local hospitals after suffering smoke-related injuries that were believed to be minor.

Their co-workers huddled together on a patch of grass, some marked with tear-stained cheeks.

"We were still in that lull before lunch, thank goodness," said Lisa O'Malley, the restaurant's manager. "It went up fast."

The 80-year-old pulled from the fiery Crown Victoria sat in a lawn chair next to Oldaker, as the two watched firefighters battle the blaze. She was checked out by paramedics but

appeared to be OK, save for some scratches. Her name was not available.

Oldaker, a Clark College student, said that after pulling the woman from the car, he took her to sit in his truck. But they soon moved to the parking lot to get out of firefighters' way. Her charred sedan sat next to the drive-through window hours later.

Oldaker telephoned the woman's son for her. He arrived shortly after the fire broke out and took her home.

Oldaker said he had no idea what started the car fire, just that he noticed oil leaking under the sedan before he saw a glow of flames shooting across the exterior of the car. Then suddenly, flames.

It wasn't clear how exactly the fire entered the restaurant's kitchen.

Oldaker didn't think twice when he jumped out of his truck. "I just knew I had to get

her out of the car."

He's glad he did. "I've seen nothing like this," Oldaker said, shaking his head.

The restaurant

The restaurant, which opened Aug. 16, 1996, is owned and operated by North Star Restaurants Inc., which includes 15 McDonald's in Southwest Washington. The company is owned by Val and Matt Hadwin.

Val Hadwin said Wednesday there are 50 employees at the location, and all would receive today off to recover from the trauma of the fire. After that, they'll all be returned to work at other locations, she said.

Traffic was blocked on both Fourth Plain and Fort Vancouver Way during the first couple of hours of fire crews' response. Additionally, heavy smoke on the roadway limited visibility.

Natural gas and power were shut off to the building.