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Dad of 5-year-old killed in Little Ferry fire mourns from overseas

BY MARY DIDUCH AND MINJAE PARK

STAFF WRITERS | THE RECORD

The father of the 5-year-old girl who died after her house in Little Ferry was consumed by fire on Tuesday night said Thursday that the loss was particularly devastating because he never got to meet her in person.

Jose Urena-Garcia moved with his family from the Dominican Republic to the Bronx when he was 3. But he was deported in 2010. He said he had been trying to save money to put together his paperwork so he could return to the United States and finally meet his daughter, Maribella.

Maribella succumbed to her injuries at Hackensack University Medical Center on Wednesday. Her 56-year-old grandmother, Margaret Colon, whom firefighters pulled from a window as the fire raged, also died Wednesday at St. Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston.

"She was a really nice girl, you know? Very smart," Urena-Garcia said of his daughter in a telephone interview Thursday. "What can I say? It hurts me a lot. I didn't get to meet her in person."

He last spoke to Maribella on her fifth birthday, May 20. "We always used to talk a lot, me and the baby," Urena-Garcia said.

Stephanie Colon, Maribella's mother, remained hospitalized Thursday in critical condition at Hackensack University Medical Center with broken bones that she sustained when she jumped from a window, authorities said.

Urena-Garcia said he was trying to return to the United States for the funerals of his daughter and her grandmother. He said he had been receiving updates from family members.

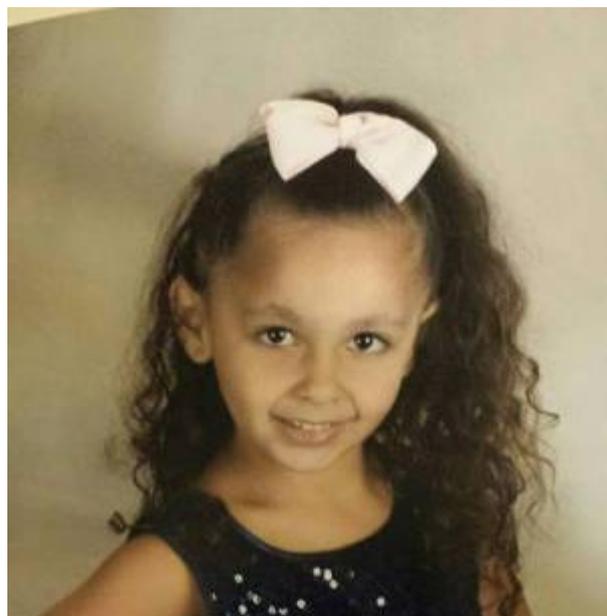
"I would love to go back but I don't know," said Urena-Garcia, who works at a call center. "I don't have the money."

Urena-Garcia said he had met Maribella's mother in Pennsylvania, where he had worked as a truck driver and she had worked at a warehouse. Colon, who had been living in the Poconos, then moved to the



TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A memorial grows outside the Little Ferry home where a fire claimed the life of a 5-year-old girl and her grandmother.



Dominican Republic, where she lived with him for a time after he was deported, he said. When Colon became pregnant, she returned to the United States. After Maribella was born, she and her baby lived with her mother.

"I feel so sorry for all this that happened to them," Urena-Garcia said. "I wish I could visit them right now to give them my regards."

Teri Coles of Rockaway said she had known Margaret Colon for 30 years through her brother, since her sister-in-law is Margaret Colon's sister.

"They were just good people that had a hard life and managed to stay together during it all," Coles said. "And Margaret was the one that kept it together."

Coles said Margaret Colon often took Maribella to family parties, where the little girl would play with two cousins who were her age.

"It was always the three little princesses," said Coles, as her voice began to break with emotion.

Maribella was a shy, beautiful girl who loved her grandmother, Coles said. The little girl was set to start kindergarten in the fall.

"She definitely was grandma's little girl," Coles said.

The fatal fire was the latest misfortune for a family that has seen adversity before. Margaret's husband died five years ago of cancer, Coles said, and a son killed himself three years ago.

"If she survived, I don't think she could have lived on without this child," Coles said.

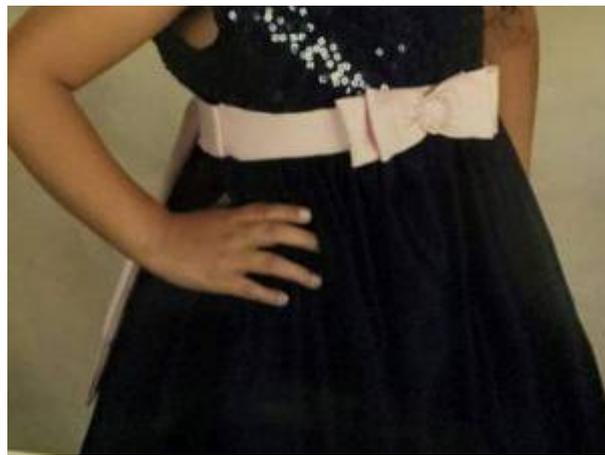
Margaret Colon had worked at Fairleigh Dickinson University for 24 years and was an assistant for the facilities department on the college's campus in Teaneck, a university spokeswoman confirmed. The family had moved to the Little Ferry home a couple of months ago, and Coles said Margaret Colon was very close to Maribella.

"We're just beside ourselves," Coles said.

The fire at 119 Washington Ave. began about 11:30 p.m. Tuesday in the garage area and spread to the rest of the multifamily home, killing the girl and her grandmother, and forcing others to jump out windows. Police continue to interview the injured residents, but investigators have "ruled out anything suspicious or foul play," said Little Ferry police Lt. Jim Walters, declining to elaborate. The Bergen County Prosecutor's Office is "assisting in this investigation," spokeswoman Maureen Parenta said, but referred questions to Little Ferry police.

Witnesses described hearing a series of explosions, seeing flames engulf the home and hearing the residents screaming for help. Three police officers who responded to the call suffered minor injuries. Twelve fire departments responded.

David Lucero protected his family from the smoke with wet towels and helped them escape out a second-floor



Maribella Colon

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSE URENA-GARCIA



Stanley Billins of Little Ferry ties balloons to the front steps of the Little Ferry home on Thursday, Aug. 18, 2016.

TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Linda McCann of Moonachie and her eight-year-old granddaughter Destiny Anderson ties balloons to the front steps of the Little Ferry home on Thursday, Aug. 18, 2016.

TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

window, police said. He remained at Holy Name Medical Center in Teaneck as of Wednesday night with cracked ribs and a broken shoulder from the jump.

“He’s a real hero, that guy,” Walters said. “He did an unbelievable job.”

Lucero’s wife and two of his daughters suffered minor injuries and were taken to Holy Name but later released, Little Ferry police Detective Sgt. Ronald M. Klein Jr. said. The youngest daughter, Joanna, 6, was uninjured.

The resident of the first floor, Shiva Singh, 67, was unhurt, Klein said.

As residents of the small borough whose population is 10,806 awaited answers on the cause of the fire, they were setting up ways to donate to the victims to help them rebuild, as well as paying tribute to those who died.

“We’re a small town but we have a big heart,” Mayor Mauro Raguseo said. “So when somebody’s hurt or somebody needs assistance, the community comes together and helps. And we’ve been getting phone calls and emails from people all over the county saying, ‘What can we do to help?’”

Linda McCann of Moonachie and her 8-year-old granddaughter, Destiny Anderson, stopped by the three-story house – charred and boarded up – on Thursday morning with balloons to tie to the front railing of the house.

“It could have been my granddaughter,” McCann said.

“I have lived my life and they are just starting to live theirs,” she said.

Around noon, Fumie Fujimura, who lives across the street and witnessed the fire, stopped by the home and left a doll and flowers on the steps. For several minutes, Fujimura knelt by the house, bowed and cried.

Staff Photographer Tariq Zehawi contributed to this article. Email: diduch@northjersey.com

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