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Gratitude in the ruins: dog survives explosion

Officials investigate the second home blast in a month caused by contractors who punctured gas lines.

By **BILL McAULIFFE** and **AIMEE BLANCHETTE**, Star Tribune staff writers

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The last call Matt Augustson might have expected on his business trip to Europe was the one from Westgate Pet Clinic in Minneapolis.

"They said, 'We have your dog and she seems to be OK, but she's a little singed,'" Augustson said. "I thought, 'Why do you have her and why is she singed?' That's when I started to put 2 and 2 together."

Augustson returned to the Twin Cities Wednesday to begin putting the rest of his and his wife Jen's lives together. A natural gas leak and explosion destroyed their Edina home Tuesday and left them with their two kids, their dog Grete and little else, beyond Matt's luggage. Wednesday the couple visited the remains of their home at the corner of Arden Av. and W. 50th Street, finding a hole

in the ground and a corner lot strewn with ice-covered, barely recognizable personal possessions.

"I'm still just thinking about being relieved that we're OK, nobody was there and Grete is OK," Jen said. "Things are things, and we'll be able to replace a lot of them. But we're healthy and happy and that's most important."

It was the second time this month that a metro area home was destroyed by a gas leak caused by utility work. A St. Paul home burned down Feb. 1 after a gas line was broken by a contractor cleaning out a clogged sewer pipe, which had been penetrated crosswise by a gas line.

Elizabeth Skalnek, chief engineer for the Minnesota Office of Pipeline Safety, said that natural gas is "a clean, safe method of heating our homes" and that pipelines are the safest method of delivering it.

However, she and Edina officials acknowledged that gas leaks caused by digging and other human-caused disruptions are "not uncommon." Edina Fire Chief Marty Scheerer said most breaks occur when the work involves a hole or trench, which allows the gas to escape into open air. Tuesday's

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break was caused by an underground drill threading communication cables horizontally. When the drill punctured a gas line, the lighter-than-air, pressurized gas sought the easiest escape route, traveling through the soil 4 to 5 feet beneath the frost-capped surface, eventually entering the Augustsons' home.

CenterPoint Energy, which serves the Augustsons' neighborhood, was called Wednesday to deal with yet another leak at Lyndale Avenue St. and W. 43rd Street in Minneapolis. That was caused by workers replacing a telephone pole. There was no explosion or fire, no one was injured and one home was evacuated. Repairs were completed Wednesday. It was not related to the Edina leak.

Following the St. Paul incident, Xcel Energy Co., facing a possible \$1 million fine, announced a three-year plan to find and repair any sewer pipes penetrated by gas lines serving its 430,000 customers, possibly beginning in St. Paul as soon as April. The company has found five of those breaches since 1989.

The gas line that caused the Edina explosion at midafternoon Tuesday was fixed and service was restored to the neighborhood by

1 a.m. Wednesday. Police re-opened access to 50th Street, a busy, crosstown thoroughfare, around 9 a.m. Wednesday.

A harrowing story for family dog

No one was hurt in the blast, which was heard and felt six blocks away. Insulation from the house was found as far as a mile away, Scheerer said.

Scheerer also said it appeared that the Augustsons' nine-year-old dog Grete had been blown straight into the air by the explosion. She was found with burned toes on three feet and the fur burned off beneath her chin. "She's a black Lab and looks like a chocolate Lab," Jen Augustson said.

Jen Augustson was at work at the time of the explosion. Their two kids, ages 5 and 2, weren't home, either.

Up to 60 homes in the area were evacuated. By late Tuesday, most evacuees had returned to their homes. Many, including children, had spent several hours at the nearby Edina Country Club, where clubhouse director Carl Granberg had told authorities to spread the word: Neighbors were welcome.

A St. Paul contractor, TD&I Cable

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Maintenance, was laying telephone line and apparently broke the gas line. The company didn't respond to a phone message Wednesday.

Horizontal drilling is becoming a popular strategy for burying utility lines. Skalneek said it is less risky than trenching because it disturbs less volume and fewer structures underground. Companies rely on maps of underground utility lines to avoid accidents, but in most cases, Skalneek said, workers will still dig a "pothole" to see where and how deep various lines run. She wouldn't describe how TD&I prepared for the Edina project, noting that the incident is under investigation.

A string of property disasters

Minnesota has 70,000 miles of buried utility lines and recorded 1,431 line breaks in 2008, Skalneek said. Of those, two resulted in fires or explosions, none stemming from excavation. The Star Tribune reported two house explosions that year in Minnesota that appeared to be tied to thieves stealing copper pipes.

Tuesday's explosion was the third property disaster along W. 50th Street in less than a year. Last week several popular Minneapolis

restaurants and a gift shop were destroyed by fire about 2 miles east of Tuesday's explosion. Almost halfway between, two townhouses were destroyed and three damaged by fire last March.

According to Hennepin County records, the Augustsons' house, built in 1940, had an estimated market value of \$538,900.

North American Banking Co. has created a fund to aid the family. Donations to the Augustson Fund can be sent to the bank 4999 France Ave., Suite 120, Minneapolis, MN, 55410.

Jen Augustson called the community outpouring of support "overwhelming, but in a positive way. I'm sure it's going to be a lot of hassle figuring out what we'll do, but we'll make it work. We're OK."

Bill McAuliffe • 612-673-7646 Aimee Blanchette • 612-673-1715 Staff writers Pam Miller, Anthony Lonetree, Bob von Sternber and Abby Simons contributed to this report.

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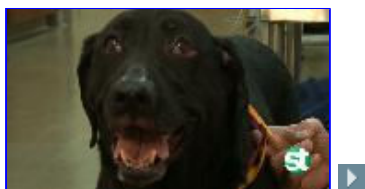
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I feel extremely sympathetic for the family for losing their house – it's a horrible thing that I wouldn't wish on anyone. I'm glad they are all safe. But their friends and family should have been aware that in this economy, many people may not have a positive reaction when asked to donate money to a family who can afford a \$580,000 house. Maybe their friends and family all live in \$800,000 houses and feel like the explosion victims must be poor? (I'm saying that completely seriously – I used to work for an Edina resident, and he was well-meaning, but he had no clue how the real world worked for those of us who don't make a 6-figure salary.)

posted by **dahutys** on Feb 25, 10 at 1:31 pm |

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OMG

Why is everyone getting all riled up over a fund being set up?? Don't contribute. Geez, it's pretty simple people.

posted by **katie64** on Feb 25, 10 at 1:45 pm |

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Fund

This is just a guess, but even with insurance - they likely don't pay right away. Meantime, assuming they owe a monthly mortgage payment, that doesn't stop just because the house is blown up. Then the insurance proceeds will go to the mortgage company. They can bring a lawsuit (likely brought by the insurance company against whoever may be responsible) but that could take years to settle. In the meantime, the family, wealthy or not, needs a place to live and to replace their stuff. They probably won't net much off the insurance proceeds depending on how much they still owe. Luckily they have apparently have friends that don't hold the appearance of wealth against them...

posted by **lbrickley** on Feb 25, 10 at 2:37 pm |

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My jaw hit the floor...Part 2

You're forgetting the best part... these people can afford a good lawyer and will be getting 7+ figures out of the guaranteed lawsuit they will be filing against those who cut the line and probably the gas co too. I completely sympathize with their loss and there is much in a home that cannot be replaced BUT honestly they all were physically unharmed by the explosion and are now financially set for life. I almost wish my house would blow up...

posted by **matheus** on Feb 25, 10 at 3:37 pm |

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personally

i would not wish this event on anyone. I appreciate their statement of gratefulness that they and dog are well and things are replaceable. So, why are we all speculating on their financial status? Donate if you wish, don't if you are not lead to. Simple. In the meantime, I wish them well and don't care to think I might know or should care about the other details of their lives.

posted by **thinkn1** on Feb 25, 10 at 3:46 pm |

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