

Thanks heavens for a family-owned business when the furnace crashes

It was an all-out Roland Park APB (all points bulletin). A month ago, on one of the coldest nights this year, the pipe that feeds water to our furnace sprang a leak. When I took a damp towel to dry up by the boiler, I saw a pool of water on the floor, with more squirting from the feeder pipe. I screamed and raced upstairs to phone BGE, where we have a service policy.

After being on hold awhile, I hung up and called our plumber, Pat O'Neill, who grew up on Gladstone Avenue. I left an S.O.S. on his answering machine. I knew the furnace would not make it until morning. I envisioned a dry boiler. I envisioned it cracking and smoldering. I envisioned the fire department answering our heat sensor alarm. I envisioned frozen pipes spewing water through the ceiling.

Then I remembered what a Colorado Avenue friend said once when I was overwrought: "Kath, picture a stove, and start turning down the burners."

I took a deep breath. I visualized the stove. I also visualized frozen pipes and a burned-up furnace and the bill for a new one.

I picked up the phone and left a message for an old friend who, just the night before, had told me how much business he did with O'Neill.

Then I called my Club Road neighbors, who had been the first to tell me that O'Neill plumbers were former Dorsey plumbers who serviced this house for decades. The husband and wife answered simultaneously. I stated our plight. They couldn't find the emergency numbers.

"Give me Jeff Pratt's daughter's number," I said. "She's in ninth grade."

I knew that Pratt, owner of Schneider's Hardware, is O'Neill's friend and that Pratt's daughter attends school with the Club Road daughters. No degrees of separation in Roland Park.

"Found it!" said the father.

"Found the cell numbers," said the wife. I called the numbers and left messages. I reached Jeff Pratt as he was sitting down with his guitar, far from holiday stress and the eccentric demands of customers like me.

"I don't know a thing about furnaces," he said, "but sit tight."

Minutes later, my phone rang. It was Ron, O'Neill's plumber, who helped install this furnace 27 years ago. He instructed me to keep feeding water slowly. Soon, the furnace kicked on. Heat filled the house.

An hour later, however, the leak was faster and the glass indicator showed no water in the furnace. I dialed Ron again. His wife said he was in bed, but handed him the phone. He said the pipes would not freeze and he would stop by on his way to work.

That calmed me, and so did the calming winds. But the temperature was dropping and would surely go below the lowest thermostat setting and ignite the dry furnace.

It was too late to call Ron. While in the basement, feeding water to no avail, my portable phone died, so I missed Pat O'Neill's call, but heard a message of reassurance on my machine. Still, I worried the thermostat would trip the furnace, so I called BGE again. This time I got through. The woman told me how to turn off the pilot and shut down the furnace.

As blue flames disappeared, my burners cooled, too. I jumped in bed and pulled up the covers.

When the doorbell rang at 7 a.m., the first floor was only a few degrees warmer than the outdoors, but there stood Ron with his tool bag.

One hour later, the furnace purred, and I sang alleluias for family-owned businesses and a tightly-knit community.

