Managing editor discovers victim is his brother

By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

Curtis Phillips, 58, and Lori Phillips, 51, remained in critical condition this morning after an oxygen tank explosion sparked a fire that destroyed the couple's home across the Oklahoma state line.

Curtis Phillips was in bed at the time of the explosion, which happened around 1 p.m. Wednesday.

"He had 60 percent of his body with second and third degree burns," his brother Larry Phillips said.

Larry Phillips heard the call of the fire while working as the managing editor of the Leader & Times, but he did not know who the victims were when he grabbed a camera and headed toward the Oklahoma border.

On his way, he received a call that said it was his brother's home.

"I have responded to dozens of calls like this over the past 13 years, but you never expect it to be your own family," he said.

When Phillips arrived, his brother and sister-in-law had already been extracted from the home

and were sitting on the tailgate of a pick-up.

“I asked my brother if he was OK, and he said, ‘No.’” Phillips said. “He had burns everywhere.”

Phillips’ sister Joy Beasley flew with the couple from Southwest Medical Center to Via Christi, and Larry Phillips made the drive.

According to Larry Phillips, Lori Phillips had burns on 9.5 percent of her body, but a scope of her lungs indicated that she had severe damage from soot and debris.

“They will try to go down further today and remove some of the debris,” Phillips said.

Curtis Phillips had second and third degree burns on 60 percent of his body according to his brother.

“His vitals are iffy,” Phillips said. “He is completely out of it. He is on several medications to keep him in a comatose state. He lost a lot of skin. He will need a number of skin grafts. The doctors said some of the second degree burns could end up being third degree.”

Phillips said his brother had COPD, and that is why he needed the oxygen.

His body was wrapped in gauze to keep it warm, and Curtis Phillips’ face was covered with burn cream.

The explosion and subsequent fire completely destroyed the couple’s home and all of its contents.

The bodies of five dogs and two cats were also found in the ash.

“My nephew went to the scene, and all he found was a couple of framed pictures,” Phillips said “Everything else was gone.”

The intensity of the fire was so hot that it also cause damage to the couple’s pick-up outside the mobile home.

“The explosions blew the headlights out of the pick-up,” Phillips said.