

SUNY Plattsburgh ... 02 09 09



February 09, 2009,

Albany, NY --- An early morning fire on February 09, 2009, took the life of 18-year-old Plattsburgh State freshman Steven Fanning and left Matt Ames, a student at the University of Albany, in critical condition.

The New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control (OFPC), launched for the first time, its campus related critical fire response. Comprised of fire safety professionals, the team is intended to provide a rapid response in the early hours after a fire that claims the live of a college student. Capturing the "teachable moment", the strike team works with officials from the affected college, local government and the community in an effort to disseminate factual information related to the incident, as well as raise general fire safety awareness.

The following article is the account of Deputy Chief Guy Swartwout, who lead the OFPC response in Plattsburgh. Fire Protection Specialist Chris Taylor, was the primary inspector assigned to SUNY Plattsburgh. We'll hear from Chris in the next issue of Campus Firezone.

Despite being members of the same organization and sharing its common goal - the safety of the one million plus people who make up New York's college community - the perspective each of these gentlemen bring to this incident is unique.

Guy Swartwout:

The brilliant sun on this beautiful day, one that had started as such a welcome breather in the midst of an especially hard winter, emphasized, by contrast, the darkness of my emotions and mission as I drove to one of the colleges that fell within my area of responsibility. It wasn't what I planned for the day nor, more significantly, for my career. I had committed myself to completing my years without ever having this happen. All changed just moments earlier with a phone call reporting an off-campus student fire death. I didn't yet know his name, we had never met but, he was one of mine. He was one of thousands of kids, or, politically correct, "students," I consider my own.

The feelings of guilt and failure were inescapable. In spite of what I knew in my head, the heart ruled in these early moments of response to the tragedy. "You are the first responders." "Ultimately you are responsible for fire prevention and your safety." "Your choices decide whether you will survive a fire." "Don't make choices that will rob the world of you." No matter how sincerely or often or intensely we preached student personal responsibility, when the unthinkable occurred my emotions labeled that responsibility as my own. I reviewed the thousands of students, staff, and administrators that have been in attendance at workshops and seminars and training programs I and my office's staff has conducted ... several programs at this very school. How did we miss him? What more could we have done? Was there a fault in the methods of contact or delivery of the message or something else that could have made a difference? ... was he in one of those classes! Ironically, his school had done far

more by way of fire safety education than many of the schools in our region. Yet, still this horrible loss.

On arriving at the scene, I was greeted by police officers, the chief and members of the city fire department, county fire authorities, and state fire investigators - my colleagues at the state Office of Fire Prevention and Control - all of who were involved in the fire and its ensuing investigation. As I walked through the building with them and was given a preliminary report by our investigators, the tragedy only became profound. At every point in the building I was shown evidence of choices that contributed to what occurred here. The house was a former private residence that had been converted into eight apartments housing 15 or 16 college students. There were no fire sprinklers. Rooms were small and stairways were narrow. I was told that firefighters had difficulty rescuing victims because in turnout gear and airparks they had a very hard time maneuvering the stairs. All of the issues of combustible fire load, limited exiting and partial obstruction of those that existed, lack of evacuation plans, the type of building construction, unrelated residents, and others that come with that living arrangement were there. There was reported to have been a party at the house just hours before the fire occurred. Evidence of alcohol consumption, frequently a part of such college fires, was everywhere. I was shown a futon where the smoldering fire, ignited by smoking materials, was believed to have started. I was told students thought they had put it out, and, at that time, the fire department was not called. A couple of hours later the 911 call reporting the working fire was made. With the exception of confirmed working smoke alarms, which doubtless saved many lives the night before, what we found was like a reverse of almost every point on our fire safety checklist handout. Another blow came when I learned that the student who died was, in fact, an on-campus student staying overnight at the house. Had he been "home" he would have been protected by alarm and sprinkler systems and evacuation plans and trained residence life staff. The worst, the student who died was confirmed to have been outside and safe. For some reason we will never know, perhaps believing there were others he could alert or rescue, he went back into the burning building.

As I was being briefed on the fire and talking with investigators and the fire chief, two of my staff members began a door-to-door canvas of the immediate area. Many of those residences were also off-campus student

housing. If they found someone home they said, "We're sure you're aware of the fire in your neighborhood. We would like to offer you some information that could help prevent it from happening here and to you." They then left a fire safety handout. If they didn't find someone to talk to, they left a door hanger that listed the most vital fire safety messages. They made contact with dozens of houses that afternoon. We left that evening with a meeting scheduled for the next morning with the fire chief and head of the city building department. We were also invited to a quickly called meeting of the college safety committee.

The next morning, the meeting with the fire chief and head of the city building department brought offers of assistance for our plan for a more far reaching door-to-door canvas. The building department provided a GIS map of non-related multiple unit residences. This allowed the targeting of pockets of concentrated student housing. Also coming from that meeting were new plans for cooperative inspection work by the building and fire departments. The college safety committee, meeting later that morning, brought unqualified commitment by leading administrators to increase fire safety efforts on campus and reach out more aggressively to off-campus students. College personnel were offered to be included with fire, codes, and our staff in the door-to-door canvas project. Many other ideas for new or expanded programs were discussed.

We received an invitation to a quickly called meeting of a group of which we were previously unaware. The city/college coalition was made up of the city fire chief, the city police department, a member of the city council, the chief and deputy of university police, the student body president, the college's Greek administrator, representatives of student affairs, and the editor of the student newspaper. There was much discussion about cooperative effort, work beyond anything previously done, new initiatives, and concrete plans for action in the days ahead and the weeks and months that follow.

As I again reviewed what had occurred and the work and outcomes of the last couple of days I quickly realized that our ability to respond quickly and with significant impact was embedded in a foundation that had been built over the course of years. In many places, at many

schools, grabbing the impact of the teachable moment would have been lost due to inability to move immediately and assemble the right people quickly to take action in education. Someone has said, "It's never too late to prepare until it is." Relationships with college administration and staff, work with the fire department, the interface between those entities, city buildings contacts, and other work by our Office had set the groundwork for rapid, effective response. The passion of staff and members within these groups drove the work with true intensity.

"Fire happens somewhere else." "Fire happens to other people, not me." "We have to resign ourselves to some number of fire deaths because there is nothing we can really do about it." Our training programs and personal encounters scream, "No!" It can happen here. It can happen to you. None of the almost 4,000 people lost in fire each year expected to die. Almost none of them had to. Their deaths were the result of wrong choices. Probably out of ignorance; a few out of willfulness but, all fatal choices. Our culture, that is to say people in the vast majority, has unthinkingly accepted these myths of fire. Just because a person is a college student or is employed by a university or holds an advanced degree doesn't automatically eradicate belief in the myths. Fire safety awareness and education are vital at every point and to every audience.

Just a month after the loss, three staff members from the school's UPD and Residence Life were attendees at one of the Center's Firewise Campus programs. They brought the unenviable but powerful perspective that

rises from experience and confirmed the reality that what was being done in that workshop was profoundly important.

I guess if there are positives that come from this tragedy they are the fact that the college staff, already believers, has made an even greater commitment to fire safety for all of their students, on and off campus. The thousands of members of the student body have had their schema shattered with the truth that the threat of fire is real ... for them. In what we have found to be an incredibly fast and intricate networking among colleges and universities, the school staff members have become evangelists for preparing and educating. Maybe, at the end, the second most important of my career goals will be advanced. That dream? That the students we are able to impact and teach will truly adopt a fire safe lifestyle and, as they become moms and dads and doctors and attorneys and community planners and politicians and architects and engineers, carry it with them and impact those they come in contact with in ways that will reduce the nearly 4,000 needless fire deaths each year.



Steve Fanning's red memorial lapel ribbon is in constant sight at my desk.

Everything I do will be directed to there never being another.