

# SETON HALL: FROM TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH

BY GERARD J. NAYLIS

**T**HE EVENING OF JANUARY 18, 2000, WAS A MOMENTOUS one for the Seton Hall University community in South Orange, New Jersey. That night, the Pirates basketball team of Seton Hall defeated its Big East rival, the Red Storm of St. John's University. No one expected that the events of the next 12 hours would completely overshadow the basketball victory and change the lives of many forever.

At approximately 4:30 a.m., a fire alarm was received for Boland Hall in the Security office at Seton Hall. Boland Hall is a six-story coed dormitory located on the western end of the South Orange, New Jersey, campus, near the main green. The original building was completed in 1952. A major addition was completed in 1976. The building is of noncombustible construction. Hollow-core block walls separate the common hallways from the individual dormitory rooms. Most rooms have double occupancy. Smoke detection equipment in the common areas of Boland Hall was tied to the fire alarm system together with the manual pull stations that transmit to the security office. In many cases, the construction and fire protection features of the Boland Hall dormitory are not unlike those of many other college dormitories across America.

## FIRE SPREAD QUICKLY

The fire on the third floor quickly involved the furniture in the roughly 25-foot by 25-foot elevator lobby and adjoining area. The couches, made of polyurethane-like foam rubber, burned rapidly, generating high heat and thick, blinding, choking smoke that would prove deadly. The heat and smoke from these limited combustibles filled the hallways while many students remained in their rooms, ignoring the fire alarms. In just a few short minutes, conditions in the hallways became oven-like.

Within minutes, students became aware that there indeed was a fire—this was no false alarm. The screams of awakened students aroused others, who found themselves trapped. Students would later recount that false fire alarms were almost considered a way of

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life on the college campus, with the result that they tended to be largely ignored.

Arriving firefighters immediately began a simultaneous attack on the fire and worked to rescue and remove trapped occupants. However, their efforts were stymied by limited staffing. Mutual aid was called, but the stage was already set for a tragedy. Ultimately, three freshman students lost their lives, and 58 additional students and staff members and four firefighters were injured. Of the 58 student injuries, five were critical, requiring extensive hospitalization—four at the St. Barnabas Burn Center and one at a trauma center.

## MEDIA FOCUS ON CAUSES FOR THE TRAGEDY

The ensuing news reports focused on many things: Fire inspections were found to be lacking. The fire alarms sounded, but they were largely ignored. The fire department response was delayed while the validity of the fire alarm was checked. And, like so many

**NEWSPAPERS AND TELEVISION STATIONS WERE ASKING THE SAME QUESTION, "WHY DIDN'T THE BUILDING HAVE A SPRINKLER SYSTEM?"**

other fire tragedies, the building was reportedly in compliance with code requirements at the time of construction but not with current standards—in other words, the building did not have a working, functional sprinkler system. This proved to be a defining conclusion by the news media. They finally had identified the single most important issue surrounding this tragedy. The only trouble was that they didn't realize it for several days.

Print and electronic media sought comments from the fire service community and public officials. They asked, "Why weren't sprinklers required? Would sprinklers have made a difference? How did the fire start?" These questions were met with icy replies: "The fire is under investigation"; "It's too soon to speculate"; and, worse yet, "No comment." While the aspects of the investigation should have been kept close to the vest, why couldn't there have been an official comment that addressed the known and perceived fire protection issues? Unfortunately, the fire service, to a large extent, does not know how to deal with the media, let alone master this art.

Several days passed before the media were able to reach individuals they described as prominent firefighting officials who were willing to comment on the record. Not surprisingly, the focus of

almost all news mediated the new question,

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## Seton Hall: From Tragedy to Triumph

almost all of the comments was on the lack of automatic sprinkler protection. Now the news media had their story. Front-page headlines and leading story introductions dominated the news coverage of the story. Newspapers and television stations were asking the same question, "Why didn't the building have a sprinkler system?"

### A CATALYST FOR ACTION

As has happened in the case of past tragedies, the Seton Hall fire set in motion a chain of events that ultimately taught the nation and the nation's fire service lessons that resulted in fire code revisions aimed at preventing such disasters in the future.

Following the fire at the Cocoanut Grove nightclub in Boston on November 28, 1942, which killed 492 people, the news media focused on the fact that the exit doors swung inward instead of outward. The fire codes were soon revised to have the exit doors swing out instead of in.

During the 1958 Our Lady of Angels School fire in Chicago, Illinois, fire raced up the unenclosed stair towers unchecked. The news media documented how 95 students and nuns were killed as a result. The fire codes were changed to require that exit stair towers be enclosed.

In the wake of the Seton Hall fire, some members of New Jersey's fire service community felt that the time was ripe to take advantage of this tragedy and salvage some good from it.

Shortly after the news reports, a number of state legislators expressed sorrow and indignation. They also introduced at least six pieces of legislation aimed at requiring the retrofit installation of automatic sprinkler protection in all college and university dormitories. Each of the proposed bills had its own special requirements with just enough differences that the bills could be logjammed in the legislature with no hope of passage in sight. The bills designated different buildings to be sprinklered, different time frames for compliance, different funding mechanisms, and varying amounts of funding.

### COALITION FORMED

The fire service leadership decided to develop alliances with those outside the fire service to push the legislation along to a successful conclusion. This group came to be known as the Coalition for Safe School Housing and included the fire service; organized labor; the sprinkler industry; and a multitude of organizations, including the state's AFL-CIO. It was also apparent to this group that most of the political figures dealing with this issue needed to be educated about what automatic sprinklers are and how they work.

Within weeks, hearings were scheduled on bills in the State Senate and Assembly. The Senate bill called for only dormitories to be sprinklered. Amendments to extend it to fraternities, sororities, and boarding schools were initially spurned. The first bill would have required compliance within 15 months, but that was soon amended to two years. It was clear that there was support for the installation of sprinklers, but the proposed legislation was not as broad as the fire service would have liked. The college community also expressed support for the requirement. Its concerns were the time frame for compliance and the funding mechanism.

On the Assembly side, no fewer than three separate hearings were held on the bills. John V. Kelly, chairman of the Assembly's Housing Committee and also chairman of the state's Fire Safety Commission, called for the hearings. In a wise procedural move, Kelly invited members of the Assembly's Education Committee to participate in the hearings. During these hearings, the sentiment was to ensure that the legislation was complete and comprehensive enough to address the need rather than rush something through for the sake of appearance.

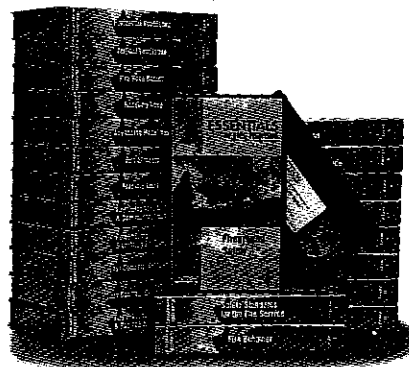
Testimony offered was in support of the need for sprinkler protection and covered the size and scope of the areas that needed to be sprinklered, the resources within the sprinkler industry to meet the need, and the time frame in which the work could be done. There was conflicting testimony pertaining to the latter. The colleges and universities' position was that the work could be done only during the summer months when school was not in session. The sprinkler industry countered that work could proceed throughout the year. It cited its experience in hotels and motels as evidence of its ability to work within an operating building. Ultimately, in April, Kelly visited Seton Hall, which was in the process of installing sprinklers in all dorms. Based on that visit, Kelly found out firsthand that the work could be done while school was in session.

Other concerns were identified and had to be addressed as the process evolved. These

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issues included how asbestos abatement needed to be done at many of the older buildings that would be affected. Legislators asked whether price per square foot could be relied on to develop budgeting numbers for the legislation. The range of anticipated costs was from a low of \$2.50 to a high of \$11 per square foot. The higher numbers typically included other work that would result from the sprinkler installation, such as patching, spackling, and painting.

Glaring differences between the Senate and Assembly bills included the time frame for compliance, what would be included in the requirement, the amount of money for the work, and where the money would come from. The Senate bill was requiring compliance in two years and covered only dormitories. Money was to come from a modification of a higher education bonding act that developed approximately \$50 million. The Assembly version was leaning to five years, and, more importantly, included fraternities, sororities, and boarding schools. The Assembly bill set up funding of between \$90 and \$100 million to establish a revolving low-interest loan program.

For several weeks following the Seton Hall fire, area newspapers reported almost every fire that occurred at a college or university in New Jersey. They were all relatively minor in nature, and at least one fire was contained by a single sprinkler, resulting in minor damage.

## PENNSYLVANIA TRAGEDY

Then, two months to the day after the Seton Hall fire, tragedy struck at a fraternity house fire in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania. Five fraternity brothers were killed. Ironically, one of the fraternity brothers killed in the Bloomsburg University frat house fire was from the same town and church parish as one of the freshman students killed eight weeks earlier at Seton Hall.

The momentum initially generated gained even more steam. The focus now became not just dormitories but all student residences. The deaths in Bloomsburg reinforced the lessons of the 1996 University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, fraternity house fire. Among the contributing factors in that fire were lack of a sprinkler system, careless disposal of smoking materials, and unenclosed central stairways. For this legislation to be truly effective, fraternities, sororities, and boarding schools would have to be included.

The scope of the installations meant that more than 36,000 beds were to be protected by sprinklers. This represented approximately 71 percent of the college beds in New Jersey and affected 56 of the state's public and private colleges and universities. This would mean that it would more likely take up to five years to complete the work instead of the two years stated in the Senate bill, which by now had passed in the Senate and was awaiting action in the Assembly. Just as it appeared that the five-year plan was to be adopted, Governor Christine Todd Whitman's office issued a statement indicating her support of the bill, but with a four-year window for implementation.

It was late May, and the legislature was busy working to formulate the state budget, which by state constitution had to be completed by July 1. In what can only be described as an incredible game of legislative ping pong, the sprinkler bill was passed in the Assembly with the five-year window; was sent over to the Senate, where it was amended to a four-year window, as requested by the Governor; and was sent back to the Assembly, where the amended bill was approved. All this was done in a matter of three weeks. The bill was sent to the Governor for her signature to complete the process.

On July 5, 2000, in a modestly attended bill signing ceremony on the green of Seton Hall University, in the shadow of Boland Hall, the most comprehensive legislation requiring sprinkler protection in college dormitories, fraternities, sororities, and boarding schools was signed into law. The law requires that automatic sprinklers be installed within a maximum period of four years. All schools are required to submit a compliance plan within 120 days to the state's Division of Fire Safety. The installation must be done in phases that stipulate that roughly 25 percent of the work be done each year at a minimum. One key element of the legislation is that water companies are prohibited from assessing water supply standby charges for any of these sprinkler systems. This was seen as a major victory for the fire service in New Jersey, which has been pushing this issue for almost two decades. Similar legislation is pending in Pennsylvania.

Naturally, there are some downsides to the legislation. For one, the state of New Jersey still does not have any regulations on the books for the licensing or certification of individuals or firms that install automatic sprinkler systems. Interestingly enough, there is strong support for this type of regulation from the affected industry. The fear expressed by the fire service is that "anyone with a pickup truck and a pipe wrench" will be flocking to the state to install sprinklers.

## LESSON LEARNED AND REINFORCED

What are the lessons learned from the Seton Hall fire?

- Perhaps the most important is that it is possible to have an impact and effect positive change in light of a serious tragedy. But that would require doing things that the fire service hasn't really done well in the past, including talking and working with the media, building coalitions, educating public policy makers about fire safety issues, and recognizing that there are others who do not share our passion for a particular issue.

- We still have a long way to go to overcome attitudes about fire safety, including the subject of fire-related human behavior. Most people still think that fires don't happen to them—that they happen to other people, and that when a fire alarm activates it must mean it's a false alarm because that's all it ever is. The even larger issue is overcoming the acceptance of false fire alarms.

- The fire at Seton Hall University also exposed a number of areas where improvement is warranted. Fire department staffing and response, alarm notification procedures, preincident planning, fire code enforcement, and inspections have all been identified as lacking. Passing a mandatory sprinkler law will not alleviate the need to address these issues. At the bill signing, Assemblyman Kelly reminded all present that sprinklers alone are not the answer. Sprinklers in conjunction with strong fire prevention efforts, code enforcement, fire safety education, and an adequately staffed fire department are all necessary components of an effective fire defense system.

Recognizing that most advances in fire safety come only after we have made a prepayment in human suffering, the fire service must be ready to seize the moment when a tragedy strikes. This may sound cold, but it is the truth. If the deaths and injuries sustained in fires are to result in any positive outcomes, it will only be because the fire service was prepared to act on them. We also need to constantly remind ourselves that if it has happened somewhere else, it can happen here. The real tragedy of the Seton Hall fire is that there is little, if any, action moving ahead for similar legislation in other states other than Pennsylvania. ■

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