

Pull the Alarm
The Flames that Started Change

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Paper
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In December of 1958, a tragic fire started in the basement of Roman Catholic school Our Lady of the Angels in Chicago, Illinois. Ninety-five people died, 92 young children and three nuns, triggering the development of new laws and fire regulations in schools and public buildings. The barrier to keeping vulnerable people safe in public buildings had been broken. Today, because of stricter fire code regulations, school fire prevention devices, training drills, and functioning and accessible safety precautions, everyone is safer.

In 1910, Our Lady of the Angels' congregation built a two-story building that was used as both a church and a school. By 1939, the building had been renovated and remodeled multiple times and additional working space had been added. The entire framework was now used as a school (a new church had been built across the street). The new school building consisted of the original north wing and a newer south wing connected by an annex.

Shockingly, Our Lady of the Angels' school had just passed a routine fire department safety inspection only shortly before their disaster. The school was not legally required to comply with all of the 1958 safety fire codes due to a grandfather clause. The clause stated existing older schools, such as Our Lady of the Angels' school, did not have to implement the fire safety standards that were legally required by schools built after 1949. This provision meant the entire school building (the combination of the north wing, the south wing, and the annex) was covered by the

grandfather clause and needed only to abide by fire regulations that were severely outdated; fire laws that were obsolete even for that time.

Although the Chicago Fire Department had examined and approved the school and determined that it was legally safe, the school was soon to experience a fire so out-of-control it would cause great loss of life and extreme tragedy. The inspectors from the fire department must have seen that the school was not up to current standards, but they failed to mention their findings to the school, most likely because the school only needed to meet the outdated fire regulations.

At the time the school was originally built, wood was a very common resource to use as a building material. Lumber was both readily available and economical; an option that allowed schools to stretch their limited funds. Other building materials were simply too difficult to access as well as too expensive. As a result, Our Lady of the Angels' school building was built almost completely out of wood: floors, stairs, walls, doors, and even the roof were all built with low-quality timber. Wood was a highly flammable material because it had the capability to flame almost immediately when contacted with a high air temperature or fire. The only non-wood portion of the school was the outer brick layer that made up the exterior walls of the building.

Unbeknownst to all, a potential fire in the building would be perfectly set for disaster and tragedy. The entire building only had access to a single fire exit which was located near the original north wing. Fire alarm switches were also sparse. Although unknown at that time, the two isolated fire alarms existing in the newer south wing were

not even directly connected to the local fire department. The original north wing did not incorporate a single fire alarm at all. A few fire extinguishers were available in the north wing; however, they were mounted seven feet off the ground, completely out of reach for most adults and certainly all young children. Causing additional complications, the building had only one fire escape and also did not contain any sprinklers or smoke detectors. Because of these appalling conditions, a raging fire would soon present terrible tragedy.

People have different theories about how the fire started, but the official cause of the fire remains unknown; no one knows what truly happened. Some people claimed a teacher asked two students to dump a waste barrel in the basement and the garbage caught on fire. However, other people believed that a 13-year-old boy who was infatuated with flames started the fire by dropping a match into the waste barrel. The primary bottom line from this horrible catastrophe is that 95 people died and countless others were injured because proper fire prevention controls were not established or maintained in a public building. The fire emergency resulted in the loss of life for many vulnerable and innocent victims. Experts believe the fire had been burning for over 40-minutes and was completely out of control by the time the fire department arrived. The north wing's second floor had become a perfect fire trap.

While we do not know what occurred that initiated this fatal fire, we do know that the school was highly flammable because of being built with a majority of wood. The initial blaze rushed past the fire-blocking doors on the first floor and proceeded quickly

to the second floor. It is thought that fire-blocking doors were either not available on the second floor, or if they did exist, they were left open. Because of the lack of fire-blocking doors on the second story of the building, it took no time at all for the fire to make its way up the stairs and onto the second floor in the north wing of the school.

Some students reported smelling smoke in a classroom on the first floor. The Sister in charge of that class let another nun know what she feared and they both decided to evacuate their classes. After their students were safely out of the building, the Sister went back into the school and pulled the internal fire alarm. The alarm was located on the south side of the building; its warning allowed the other first-floor classes to vacate the building and thus saved their lives.

Unfortunately, some of the nuns thought the alarm was sounded in error, so they did not allow their students to leave the burning building. These teachers would end up regretting their decision as the fire grew and crawled closer to the lecture rooms where they were teaching.

Tragically, the students from the classrooms that weren't released became trapped. Toxic gasses filled the classrooms making it incredibly difficult to breathe. Complete chaos broke out and young children were unable to fend for themselves. Because of the lack of quality air and the impending fire, children were trying to escape the inferno through the windows; they jumped, were pushed, or fell - landing on concrete and crushed rock - often with their hair and clothing in flames. Many neighbors rushed to put up their personal ladders to assist with rescues; however, because the

building had a raised basement (common for buildings in that era), the second floor was actually at the typical height of a third-floor building (approximately 25-feet). Due to this additional height, their personal ladders were not tall enough to reach the children.

Remarkably, some trapped children tried to prevent the deadly smoke from wafting through the cracks in their classroom doors by stuffing the spaces around the doors with books. The plan backfired in one classroom, and the room filled with toxic smoke and heat that blasted enough energy to break all the windows in the classroom. The blast left the children burnt with scorched hands.

In another room, children blocked the door with furniture and books in order to slow down the entrance of the seeping smoke and flames with success until they were rescued; only two of the 55 children in that particular room perished.

Because the predominantly wood school was burning so quickly and the inferno was growing instantaneously in size, the fire easily made its way up to the attic above the second-floor rooms. The heat from the higher blaze then caused the scalding hot ceiling tiles to come unglued and drop on the innocent children beneath them. Their vulnerable lives could have been so easily saved with some simple fire prevention policies and fire safety measures. If only help had been dispatched immediately, more children could have survived.

About 30-minutes after the fire started, the school janitor saw the fire and told the rectory housekeeper to call the fire department. The housekeeper did as was told, but

failed to reference the exact address of the burning building and instead only used the general location, a factor that ultimately had a huge impact on the response to the fire. Because of this miscommunication, firefighters were first sent to the wrong address and lost valuable time having to redirect their trucks and reposition their hoses.

When they arrived at the correct building, they still needed to break through an 8-foot iron fence, which was locked due to previous vandalism, before they could get to the children. More minutes were lost as firefighters tried to knock down the fence with sledgehammers. They finally resorted to backing their truck into the fence in order to knock down enough of the fence so that they could enter the school grounds. A firefighter took a 24-foot extension ladder off the engine and propped it to a window on the north end of school, protecting at least two students from jumping out of the window. Two other firefighters brought a life net and tried to catch children jumping but had to stop because the jumpers were landing on top of one another. The firefighters instead tried to physically break the falls of children. Many children died because of their fall.

Firemen attempted to rescue children, but nightmare conditions had already become gruesome. The temperature from the heat of the fire continued to increase until there was a massive explosion. Children were hysterical and screaming, trying to breathe and escape. Then the school's roof collapsed crushing and causing the death of additional children. Due to air drafts and additional oxygen supplies, the fire continued to roar, and many died from smoke inhalation and asphyxiation.

Other children who plunged from the windows to get away from the blaze endured shattered or broken bones and critical burns. There was no counseling for the survivors. Victims were advised not to talk about the deadly event. In a fateful way, the school fire brought the community closer together. People were devastated and were not able to talk about what had happened for many years. Every year on December 1, the anniversary of the school fire, family members and friends meet and share memories about their loved ones who did not make it out of the fire. Families say that this healing process will continue until there is no one left to remember the people that died; it still goes on today.

The Our Lady of the Angel's fire disaster was the lead story in world-wide newspapers. The Catholic Pope John XXII talked about the tragedy. The fire traumatized the community and shocked the world. School administrators and staff knew that changes needed to be made to protect children while they were in school. People knew that new up-to-date fire prevention policies and procedures had to be established in order to keep children safe. The loss of vulnerable lives, as well as injuries to those who were lucky to survive, was unimaginable and should have been prevented.

People were broken, devastated, and eager to create change. Parents wanted to believe their children would be safe in school. Fire prevention safety posters were hung all over the nation. Fire investigators came from all over, including out of the country, to study the site of the fire and learn valuable lessons. Although this disaster was

heart-wrenching, it also led to future major improvements in regard to safety standards for the future designs of schools and fire safety codes.

Two years after the Our Lady of the Angels' school fire, more than 16,000 federal schools had performed significant renovations to ensure the safety of vulnerable school children. School fire safety regulations were implemented nationwide. Older school buildings were improved to meet building codes and fire regulations. New amendments and ordinances were passed and improvements to state fire codes were reviewed and implemented. The changes were slow as the repairs and improvements were expensive for schools.

The National Fire Protection Association demanded that schools complete a long list of fire safety improvements such as regular law-mandated fire drills during the school year. A law was passed that required a fire alarm box to be installed in front of all schools as well as in some public buildings. According to updated laws, fire alarm systems had to be tested to ensure they were connected to their local fire department. Sprinkler systems were deemed necessary and pertinent.

Today, schools across the nation follow very strict fire safety regulations that are mandated to assure our vulnerable school children are safe from potential harm. Modern-day fire codes have been extensively upgraded compared to the subpar guidelines that were in place for the protection of children in 1958. Although these updated fire prevention laws show great progress and are reasons to celebrate success, one must also remember that the cost of progress was immense. Ninety-five

innocent victims died an awful death. Survivors and families suffered tremendous loss. The flames that started change and broke the barrier on fire-protection in our schools happened at a horrendous cost.

How you chose your topic:

Mrs. Perry helped me choose my topic. I wasn't too sure what I wanted my project to be about. When everyone else knew what they were going to do, I was still deciding. After I learned a bit about the Our Lady of the Angels School fire I knew that it would be a good topic to learn about. I didn't know anything about this so I felt that I would get a lot of information from it. I also thought about how much easier it would be to learn about something that I had never heard of before.

How you conducted your research:

At first, I looked up my topic on the Internet. Then I looked more deeply into other parts of my topic story. As I did all of my research I also took notes and saved the URLs to make sure that I wouldn't lose them. This really helped because taking notes and saving the sources was a way to make my knowledge organized. After I looked on the Internet I started to watch interviews on my subject to understand what people were feeling.

How you selected your presentation category and created your project:

After I finished my research I found that I had too much information to put it into an exhibit. Even if I did manage to take out parts of the story that were not as important, it still didn't feel like it was the true story without it all in there. After I took all of that to heart I decided to write a paper, this way I had some wiggle room in case I found out more about my topic or if I decided that I really didn't need this part of my paper to tell the whole story.

How your project relates to the NHD theme:

My project relates to my theme in multiple ways. My paper focuses on the school fire while still allowing other parts to slip into the story. My theme has a lot of heart and emotion in it, and you can feel all of that in my paper you get the sad and scary moments. Most of all you can understand the importance of this topic and how it has affected all of our schools today.

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