

Safety concerns raised after deaths of three US students in fire at Seton Hall University

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21 January 2000

A fire erupted early Wednesday morning in a dormitory at Seton Hall University in New Jersey killing three 18-year-old students, Frank S. Caltabilota, John N. Giunta and Aaron C. Karol. Another 62 students at this private Catholic university were injured from smoke inhalation, burns and accidents sustained during the escape. Six of those hurt suffered severe burns and are listed in critical condition.

Around 4:30 a.m., smelling smoke and hearing cries for help, students realized that the alarms sounding were not a fire drill and began fleeing the building. One person was forced to jump out a window. Others tied sheets together in order to lower themselves down from the six-story building before firefighters rescued them with a ladder. A witness reported seeing people hit with falling ceiling panels. One student recalled watching a fellow resident shivering in subfreezing temperatures making his way outside. His skin was black and seared.

While the South Orange Fire Department was able to contain the blaze quickly, heat and smoke traveled throughout the building. The cause of the fire is unknown, although some students have been quick to point out that many of their peers would smoke in the lounge where it is believed the blaze began. Thus far, Donald Campolo, Essex County Prosecutor, has not declared that anything suspicious caused the blaze, but the news media has reported police are searching for three students who were asked to leave the dormitory before the blaze began. The residence has no sprinkler system.

At a memorial service on Wednesday evening, school officials and church representatives said the tragedy was an incomprehensible act of God. Much attention, however, is being given to the frequency of false fire alarms in the building and the desensitizing effect this had on the students. Since the start of the academic year

there have been 18 false alarms in Boland Hall alone. During the final exam period, four sounded in one evening. Laura Santiago, a junior at Seton Hall, told the WSWs that "there were just too many pranks. Sometimes students would hide in their closets so they wouldn't have to come out."

While the regularity of college mischief may have increased the likelihood of dorm residents ignoring the fire alarms, according to representatives from various fire organizations, unresponsiveness to the warning signals is very common. Julie Reynolds of the National Fire Protection Association said, "It's pervasive in our society. People in general don't think fire is going to happen to them. They think they're safest in the places they're least safe."

Serious questions are now being raised about the safety of the building. In 1996 there were two fires in Boland Hall, both on the same evening, one in a lounge, another in a garbage storage room. One student told to this reporter that, at that time, "everything seemed under control."

However, Boland Hall, the home to 640 residents on the campus, is not equipped with a sprinkler system. University spokeswoman, Lisa Grider, maintains that the reason for this is that 48 years ago, at the time of construction, building codes did not require the installation of sprinklers. In addition, fire hoses in the residence hall were disconnected and partially dismantled because the equipment was outdated. One student recalled seeing old hoses piled on the floor in the residence hall.

School officials are trying to dispel the criticism by observing that the fire department did not need to use the fire hoses when it arrived, preferring to use its own equipment. However, one of the reasons cited for the rescue authorities' reliance on its own fire hoses to fight

the blaze was the outmoded nature of the school equipment. Jane Solomon, a student at the university who used to be a volunteer firefighter, maintains that if the school hoses had been hooked up students could have used them to put out the blaze prior to the arrival of help.

As students and families gained knowledge of this, some expressed anger. Patricia Brown, a parent of a Seton Hall student, said, "I think it is a terrible tragedy. I want to know why the sprinklers weren't on and why the [fire] hoses were lying on the floor." No explanation has been given yet for why renovations updating the obsolete equipment were not undertaken.

Yesterday afternoon, after a sleepy resident strode out of Boland Hall at 1 p.m. to the exuberant embrace of his entire family, further criticisms emerged about the conduct of school officials and rescue authorities in the aftermath of fire. Apparently, school officials and rescue authorities failed to do a complete search of the building. Sylvia Ringey, the student's mother, angrily indicted those responsible. "Everyone told me 100 times that there was no one in there."



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