

Voices from Southgate
Beverly Hills Supper Club Fire
May 28, 1977

Dick Riesenbergr – DR

Mike O'Day – MO

John Daley – JD

Marc Muench – MM

Kevin Sanzenbacker – KS

John Braun – JB

Ray Muench – RM

Jerry Sandfoss – JS

Caption: On the warm spring evening of May 28, 1977, members of the Southgate, Kentucky volunteer fire department responded up this driveway. Dispatched at 9:01 p.m., they thought it would be another routine call at the Beverly Hills Supper Club, a facility described by its owners as the "Showplace of the Nation." What they found at the top of the hill was anything but routine.

Caption: Almost 3,000 patrons were trying to escape a fire blasting from the "Zebra Room," rapidly overtaking the entire building, a structure expanded room by room since its opening in the 1930's. As the apparatus roared up the driveway, superheated black smoke already was filling most of the 18 meeting rooms and hallways leading to the emergency exits. In the Cabaret Room, the largest and most difficult room to access with rescue equipment, people were jamming doorways trying to escape the fire. People leaving by the canopied main entrance stopped just outside the doors, blocking escape for those behind.

Caption: Throughout the remainder of Saturday night and well into Sunday, ambulances and police cars shared the then immaculately landscaped driveway with rescue trucks, pumpers, aerals, and surviving patrons. Eventually 522 firefighters would respond to the site, spending 93 hours on the stubborn fire. In the end, the fire claimed 165 victims and \$50 million in litigation settlements. All that remains of the building "that might easily become your habitual habitat of pleasure" is 78 acres overgrown with amur honeysuckle bushes and the memories of those who were there. The Voices from Southgate are those of the Firefighters.

Caption: Dick Riesenbergr. Southgate Fire Chief 1977.

DR: When I left my house, I told my mother, my brother, my wife, I said, "I'll be right back." We had been to Beverly Hills on many occasions...dumpster fire, maybe a light in a parapet. And they always called us. Or maybe a small kitchen fire. In my mind,

that's what we had here. And we responded. I was in an old utility van we had with a captain at the time and two firefighters. When we rounded the bend where you could visually see the building, my heart was in my mouth. I think...I think I realized what it was, and subconsciously. But consciously, no. I saw smoke coming out of it, front to back, out of the eaves. Obviously, I know we had a big fire. I saw people streaming out of that front, what we called from then on the east side door. That was the front door, near the stage. And I saw people getting out of there as we were driving down. So it didn't bother me, at this point, it didn't bother me. Perhaps it was the next 20 or 30 minutes before I found out, from one of my firemen, that indeed there were people already dead when we arrived and more people trapped inside.

Caption: Mike O'Day. Ft. Thomas Firefighter 1977.

MO: The first 45 minutes to the hour, all we did when we were there was try to recover, try to get as many people as we could reach because of the heat and the smoke came down on us pretty fast.

Caption: John Daley. Southgate Firefighter 1977.

JD: That time, I found a crew, I believe it was John Braun who was leading a crew in through the kitchen, do what we could. Most of the rescue was over. Either the building wasn't totally evacuated or the firefighters weren't called out of the building. There was still some suppression going on, but pretty much the rescue effort...I can recall looking around the back and the only thing I can compare it to...it looked like a war scene, something like that I'd seen on television, bodies laying around. I didn't focus too much on that, really. I just wanted to fight some fire at that time.

Caption: Marc Muench. Southgate Firefighter 1977.

MM: Heard the...heard the house siren go off, so I said, "Let's start to mosey on down to the house." And back to her house and find out what's going on. It wasn't 15 or 20 second after that I could hear the city of Newport responding all units. And they had about four units screaming up that street and we were looking down at Newport at the time, so. We picked up our pace quite a bit then. I called the house and the only words my mother said on the other end of the telephone were, "Beverly Hills is on fire and there's people trapped."

Caption: Kevin Sanzenbacker. Southgate Firefighter 1977.

KS: I immediately went to the back of the building with Captain Braun at the time. We did work in the garden area. I was a cadet at the time. I was not permitted to go into the building or so I was stationed at the back doors, assisting with the bodies or what have you.

Caption: Marc Muench. Southgate Firefighter 1977.

MM: I took a walk around the back, caught up with my dad out front. He was okay but just told me to go find my brothers and make sure they were okay. Found one brother at the back door assisting there and found another brother in the chapel with an oxygen

mask on. And I thought he was...it didn't look good at first. They kicked him in the side and he opened his eyes, so... And the third brother was also in there with him, took a blow and got some oxygen. But they couldn't keep him...if you know these guys, they weren't in there for five minutes. They snuck out.

Caption: Chuck Hazel. Southgate Police Officer 1977.

CH: I was going through trying to get identification. I remember one of the guys was like a president of one of the steel companies, I think it was Armco Steel or something like that. And then I went on down the line and I guess if anything had really affected me, I came across a young lady, looked to be in her early twenties, and looked to be about nine months pregnant. And I guess if anything really bothered me and upset me, it was that. It just...I was sick for three days because of that.

Caption: Mike O'Day. Ft. Thomas Firefighter 1977.

MO: I went to work up on the roof area. We went to work in the main lobby area with two and a half...like John said, we drug two and a half through the main lobby because that's when.... By that time, the roof was coming in from the inside and there was a lot of fire visible, so that's when we drug the two and a half inch line through the main lobby and was doing some heavy work in that area there. And then we eventually got to the roof and pulled some fake siding off that they had covered the old windows of the old building and we got there and we could see all the way through the crystal room and the other rooms that were on the second floor, which by that time was a lot of fire.

Caption: John Braun. Southgate Fire Captain 1977.

JB: And, I will never forget this and I don't mean to sound gross about it, but I stepped on something and it squished. And I, not being able to see without my glasses, I had to get down on top of it. And it was a stack of bodies. And they was a young firefighter with me named Greg Hirsch and everything that I had ever learned or had ever taught at firefighter training about strategies or about search and rescue went out the door. No fancy carries. Grab whatever you can grab and start carrying. And I was probably in there for the length of one air bottle, there was no more to be found, I think I might have pulled out four people. I could not tell you to this day if they were dead or alive, although I suspect they were dead. And we took them to the door, the same as Mike O'Day's crew did and handed them off and they brought them down.

Caption: Dick Riesenberg. Southgate Fire Chief 1977.

DR: When I left him, I went to the rear of the building and I was virtually alone. And when I turned the corner, it hit me at that time just what we had. I first saw in the dark, I was all alone, bodies, dead bodies, that had already been recovered and had been placed in neatly stacked rows. I don't know who did that to this day. Somebody had the decency and respect and the time, I might add, to place those bodies head to head, side by side, in two and a half, three rows. And these people were all dead.

Caption: John Braun. Southgate Fire Captain.

JB: We looked at the fire coats, all the different initials. It was all SFD, or FTFD, or NFD, it was Fort Thomas, Newport, Southgate, all over. One other thing that had happened...I had been in front of the building and, as I said, I worked for fire service training so I knew most of the firefighters in seven counties. And a truck came up the hill from Warsaw, Kentucky, which has got to be 50 miles, and this was like 45 minutes into the fire. And I know their chief and he was probably going about 110 miles an hour. And they were riding the tail board. And he said – he knew me – and he said, “John, I’ve got six EMTs and I’ve got oxygen. Where do you need me?” And I said, “Around back.” I had not been around back so I really did not know what was going on. All I knew is Chief Riesenberg had said they had problems in the back and needed oxygen in the back. And that fire crew, they dropped their pumper, picked up their equipment, and off they went. And basically the rest of the evening...it was morning before I actually got around to the back of the building to see. I’m kind of like the people at the front of the building; we knew we had a serious fire, you know, obviously we knew that, but the magnitude of it I don’t think really hit me until, you know, as Chief Riesenberg had said, you go to the back of the building and you see what’s there. So that’s...that’s basically.... I did take a crew, which included, well now-Chief Daley, and some other young ones. And I need to say this one thing: When we started the cadet program down here, the chief, and I don’t remember which chief it was, it was Chief Muench, gave me that task. And I will say this: The young guys that came up through the cadet program, many of them today are career firefighters. Some are fire chiefs. And that night, even though some didn’t go into the building, some did, even though they weren’t supposed to. And I will say they all did a heck of a job, those young guys. They were actually sometimes called the “Kiddie Corps,” but they worked their tails off. And I was personally very proud of them and I know the chiefs were. And I did want to mention that fact because that’s one thing we do, sometimes overlook these young guys, 16, 17 years old, and even the ones that were 21 that had been through the cadet program, as Mike O’Day said, they grew up that night. We all grew up a little bit that night.

Caption: Dick Riesenberg. Southgate Fire Chief 1977.

DR: They were kids. And they’re men today. They were men after this fire.

Caption: Ray Muench. Ret. Chief, Southgate FD.

RM: In my words, I think it strengthened the department, if anything. The department came out a much stronger organization than what is was before, physically, and it might sound funny but even mentally. And they had more on their...they could take more, after that. I mean, this what the ultimate test, you know.

Caption: John Braun, Ret. Asst. Chief, Southgate FD.

JB: It affected all of us a little bit differently. And I mean it affected some. As Chief Ken Knipper, as I mentioned earlier, the night of the fire, six of his people came back to the firehouse, hung their gear on the rack, and never came back, which is a story I had never heard before. But I know that there were other places where people were strongly affected by this. I think that the department as a whole...this was a big blow to the city,

obviously. And I think the citizens and really the larger community of northern Kentucky pulled together. One thing's for certain: We never lacked for food up there.

Caption: Jerry Sandfoss. Captain, Ft. Thomas FD.

JS: Whenever there's a tragedy, we have to get something positive out of it. And with the tragedy here, a couple things came about. Number one, I think it took this type of fire to realize that this type of magnitude of fire can happen in any city. I think maybe up 'til then we looked at New York, L.A., big cities you know where they have these big magnitude of fires, not small cities at that. Well, as soon as this fire happened, you know, we realized this could happen to anybody. You know, you know, whether you're in New York City or a little hamlet in southern Kentucky. So it can happen. And with that, probably the best thing that came out of it was code enforcement. Up until then, inspectors probably were trained and, as John would say, on minor things. What brought about...what this brought about was a significant change in the fire marshal's office, a working relationship with the firemen themselves, and with our fire inspectors.

Caption: John Braun. Ret. Asst. Chief, Southgate FD.

JB: I was probably.... Well, according to the reports you read, I was actually probably the last person that supposedly had a chance to avert this tragedy by inspection. But to be very, very honest with you, I was really somewhat ignorant. I had been taught by a former assistant chief down here who was into prevention. We did what we thought we were doing. At that time, these larger buildings were under the jurisdiction of the state fire marshal, which was then part of the Department of Insurance. We did not have a close working relationship with them. In fact, I'm not even sure who the inspector was at the time. But I had been to this building. I had been to the building with chief Riesenbergs. We were in there, I believe, when they had been working in the cabaret room. And the actual plan was that all of this was supposed to be reviewed by the state. And we went through and we looked for the very obvious things. We looked for fire extinguishers, we looked for exit signs, we looked for things that were very, very obvious. If you had asked me could I calculate occupant load? No, I couldn't. Or how many units of exit width that were in this building? Today, I can. I am in fire prevention today. But at that point in time, I was almost flying by the seat of my pants.

Caption: Dick Riesenbergs. Ret. Chief, Southgate FD.

DR: Was I prepared for it? Probably. I think any firefighter who makes it all the way to Chief knows that it can happen, hopes that it does not, of course. We can.... Can one person do a better job than another? Sure, that's human nature. We did a swell job, I think. But in my particular case, I was very much interested in listening to John and Chief Muench. Yet, the city was wonderful. It.... Sure, what they said was true in my spirit and I don't want anybody to say, "Oh, poor Dick." That's not the point. In my particular case, this fire broke my spirit. I lost my family as a direct result of this. I was depressed and turned to alcohol, and in a big way. For three years I sought – had to seek – psychiatric help. It helped me. I finally made a life for myself. But to do that, I had to take advice from some professional people, advice that I did not want to do. I loved it here. I loved this fire department and I loved this city and I loved my family. But to make

a clean break and a new life, you have to get away from it. And I finally, reluctantly, in 1980, moved out of Southgate. And I must say, although I love these people and this great little community, I have never looked back. I can't look back. I've built another life. And memories, oh my, certainly good memories, bad memories. But I guess the part that broke my spirit was the fact that for years I felt responsible for the death of 165 people. And again professional people assured me that it wasn't my fault, this was an act of God, and these things happen. It was not an individual's fault, it was not a fire department's fault. I think because of the efforts of every man in this room and people who are not here today, only 165 people died. Many more could have. So, with that in mind, you know, I think we had a success.

Caption: Marc Muench. Southgate Fire Chief 1998.

MM: As was stated before, Southgate Fire Department's been around a long time and has a good reputation, a very good reputation, throughout this part of the state and also throughout the...throughout the...well, this part of the state and throughout the entire state. But, as far as the future, I think we're talking in the lines of code compliance and public fire education. And that is the most important thing today. It's not the half million or million dollar fire trucks running up and down the road that I believe more than halved the number of fire deaths in this country in the last 20 years. It's the updating of the codes and it's getting the people to comply the codes and it's fire education.

Caption: Voices from Southgate. John Braun, Retired Asst. Chief, Southgate FD. John Daley, Chief, Bellevue FD. Charles Hazel, Chief, Southgate PD. Marc Muench, Chief, Southgate FD.

Ray Muench, Retired Chief, Southgate FD. Dick Riesenberg, Retired Chief, Southgate FD. Kevin Sanzenbacker, Firefighter, Southgate FD.