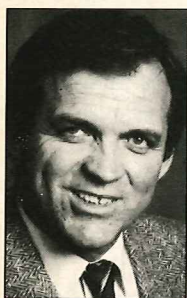


TOM BRENNAN

EDITOR'S OPINION

LESSONS, NOT DENIAL



The street box sounded. Within minutes, firefighters had water on a gasoline-fed arson fire in the entrance to a Bronx, NY "bottle club." Seven minutes later the fire was out. No screaming, no hollering, no hint of the horror that would follow.

Crawling inside, firefighters couldn't believe what their senses told them. "Bodies, we're crawling on bodies!" They turned from the 5 corpses inside the door and "made" the substandard staircase to the second floor in the hope of being able to do something—anything! If they were shaken before, nothing could prepare them for the sight on the windowless floor at the top of the stairs. A stunned and disbelieving firefighter said, "...it was just layers of

bodies. They were intertwined, contorted, and fused together. They had no chance. We had no time to help—no time to even try."

Fifty-five men and 32 women came for a night of fun and died.

Lessons? God!

Eighty-seven human beings. Instant, horrible death because of one uncontrollable act—an act all too common in some blighted communities. One deranged person lit one dollar's worth of gasoline.

The newspapers screamed and are still screaming. Politicians are shuffling bureaucratic rhetoric in many directions. Families will never stop crying. Firefighters will never be the same.

We'll pin it on particulars, I'm sure. Inadequate exits, poor lighting, illegal occupancy, lack of sprinklers. But haven't we seen this before? Local action—apparently not effective. (I've seen *that* before.)

But answers lie in generalities. Generalities because it's happened too often in the past. It can happen in any town, in any human occupancy. When disaster strikes, everyone listens. But very few listen long enough for permanent change. So many lives have been shattered by fire in our lifetimes: the Beverly Hills Supper Club, the Coconut Grove, and more recently, in the same Bronx, a total of 31 fire deaths at two illegal clubs—gasoline again. How many more do we need? The bureaucrats *now* say, "No more!" But will that last? The body of lawmakers clamoring for heads to blame is the same that refused to put teeth into legislation over a year ago that could have prevented this tragedy.

We, the saviors in the street, need our teeth back. We need our efforts and dedication to prevention of disaster reinforced to the limit and not circumvented within 24 hours by "friends of friends." This loss of human life must stand as vital testimony 10 years from now and have just the impact that it had in the month following the holocaust.

God! Please help us get over this "denial" that comes with time. These lessons are too costly for all of us.

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