

'Second chance at life': Survivors still push fire safety 20 years after Seton Hall blaze

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A pre-dawn blaze tore through a freshman dorm at Seton Hall University 20 years ago on Jan. 19, killing three students and injuring 58 others in a tragedy that brought national attention to campus fire safety and drove colleges and states to ramp up fire prevention practices and laws.

Despite reforms, the fight for safety continues, say survivors of the fire and advocates who are pressing for more student education programs, expanded sprinkler mandates and other measures they argue will save lives. Among those advocates are Shawn Simons and Alvaro Llanos, who were badly burned in the fire on Seton Hall's South Orange campus and who have dedicated their lives to preventing similar tragedies.



20 years have passed since the Seton Hall dorm fire that killed three and injured 58. Survivors Alvaro Llanos (left) and Shawn Simons are working to promote fire safety on campuses across the U.S. Llanos and Simons on Tuesday, January 14, 2020, outside of Boland Hall, where the fire took place. (Photo: Michael Karas/NorthJersey.com)

“Sometimes sacrifices have to be made,” said Simons, 38, of Roselle. “If it didn’t happen to us at Seton Hall, maybe it would have happened at Rutgers or maybe at Fairleigh Dickinson, where maybe 30 people die, and not three die. It had to happen to make things a lot safer for students.”

Today, Simons and Llanos tour colleges and high schools in the United States and Canada to talk about fire safety and overcoming adversity. In November, they’ll join the nonprofit Center for Campus Fire Safety at a three-day conference in East Brunswick to talk about the impact of the fire 20 years ago.

Laws can only go so far to protect students, say fire experts. Students need to know how to prevent fires, how to respond to an alarm, and where to go in case of fire. There’s no better reminder, they say, than hearing about the Seton Hall tragedy from the people who lived it.

“I’m hoping now that it’s 20 years, it does come into the forefront again,” said Robert Ferrara, a board member at the [Center for Campus Fire Safety](#) and director of fire safety at Montclair State University. “The (new) students do not know about Seton Hall. We have to keep educating them about this tragedy, what happened and the cause of it, how it was a prank gone wrong, and how these actions destroyed three families’ lives plus other untold injuries.”



While they slept

Most Boland Hall students were asleep when the fire broke out in a third floor lounge at about 4:30 a.m. on Jan. 19, 2000. Two students would confess years later that they had set a banner in the lounge on fire, igniting a couch that quickly went up in flames and threw off black, blinding smoke.

As fire alarms sounded, many students thought it was a false alarm because there had been many the previous semester. When they did flee, some students did not know where to go or whether to shelter in place. The fire killed three 18-year-olds — Frank Caltabillota Jr. of West Long Branch, John Giunta of Vineland and Aaron Karol of Green Brook — as they tried to escape.



An early morning fire at Boland Hall, a Seton Hall University dorm in South Orange, sent 25 students to local hospitals Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2000. The building, which houses about 600 students, was evacuated and the fire was extinguished quickly. (Photo: JEFF ZELEVANSKY, ASSOCIATED PRESS)

Llanos and Simons headed to an exit that they used daily, instead of a closer stairwell, and in so doing headed toward the fire. Simons suffered third-degree burns on 16% of his body, mostly on his hands as he crawled across scorching tile. He spent a month in the hospital and a year in occupational and physical therapy. Today, he's fully recovered except for tightness where he had skin grafts.

Llanos' burns were more extensive. When he stood to open a stairwell door, a fireball erupted and scorched him across his face and torso, leaving him with second and third-degree burns on more than half his body. He spent nine months in a hospital — three in a medically-induced coma. He then faced more than 30 operations to regain motion and heal from scarring.

A second chance at life

The two former roommates were profiled in a series by The Star-Ledger called "After the Fire," later developed into a book. In 2011, a documentary of the same name was released about their recovery and the people who helped them.

When students packed a screening of the documentary at Oregon State University, the two determined that they would make school visits a full-time commitment. They started a

company, called After the Fire, and now visit about 250 colleges and high schools each year.

Their message to students: Don't be complacent.

"I can go speak to these young adults and say, 'I know you think it can never happen to you because I thought would never happen to me, but there's a reason why you need to follow protocol. There's a reason why you need to prepare yourself,'" said Simons, who lives with his wife and two children in Roselle.



20 years have passed since the Seton Hall dorm fire that killed three and injured 58. Survivor Shawn Simons is working to promote fire safety on campuses across the U.S. Simons at Seton Hall on Tuesday, January 14, 2020. (Photo: Michael Karas/NorthJersey.com)

At the presentations, they talk about the importance of knowing exits and responding to alarms. They also talk about overcoming adversity. Llanos, who has scars on his face and body, said he struggled with self-acceptance.

"I was worried people would treat me differently. It took me a while to love myself and accept myself," said Llanos, a father of two who lives in Prospect Park, crediting his ex-wife with inspiring him to be confident in himself.

Llanos tells students during visits: "Scars do not define who we are. The things we overcome define who we are."

A devout Christian, he said his faith has helped him heal and to let go and forgive, which was not easy. After years of denials and cover-ups, perpetrators Sean Ryan and Joseph LePore admitted in 2006 that they set fire to a banner draped over a couch as a drunken prank.

They pleaded guilty to third-degree arson and were sentenced to five years at the Garden State Youth Correctional Facility in Yardville. Ryan served two years and four months of a five-year sentence. LePore, who waived his right to parole, was released in 2010.



20 years have passed since the Seton Hall dorm fire that killed three and injured 58. Survivor Alvaro Llanos is working to promote fire safety on campuses across the U.S. Llanos at Seton Hall on Tuesday, January 14, 2020. (Photo: Michael Karas/NorthJersey.com)

“My faith gave me hope to keep fighting and not give up, knowing things were going to get better and always believing that everything happens for a reason,” Llanos said. “God gave me a second chance at life so I could help others.”

Are college students safer today?

Shortly after the fire, New Jersey passed legislation that required all dormitories to have sprinklers within four years.

Other states have similar requirements for sprinklers in newly constructed buildings, but many don't require them in old buildings. That worries fire experts like Justin Daniels, fire marshal at the University of Oklahoma and president of the Center for Campus Safety, established after the Seton Hall fire to promote fire safety training on college campuses.

“We're not there yet,” said Daniels. “Until every residence hall has a sprinkler system, we haven't accomplished our goal.”



Seton Hall University students Vanessa Gomez of Maryland and Nicole Nocera of Old Bridge, N.J., wait outside the evacuated Boland Hall where a fatal fire broke out on January 19, 2000. (Photo: Ed Hill/The Record)

Since 2000, there have been 92 fatal fires on a college campus, in Greek housing or in off-campus housing within three miles of the campus — claiming a total of 132 victims — according to the Center for Campus Safety.

The vast majority of those fires — 79 — happened in off-campus housing, which often is not required to have sprinklers.

The number of fatalities would be higher if not for the lessons of Seton Hall, which also drove schools to improve fire alarm systems and student training, experts say. And college fire officials tell their own stories about how sprinklers installed after the Seton Hall tragedy may have saved lives.

Daniels said a faulty electrical cord ignited a fire on a student's bed at the University of Oklahoma last month that was doused by sprinklers.

And in March 2006, a couch caught fire just after 5 a.m. in a lounge in Bohn Hall at Montclair State, tripping sprinklers that put out the flames.

Montclair State sends emails after each fire alarm to explain what happened and why. Often alarms are triggered because cooking, ironing or using hair spray near a hairdryer have set off a smoke detector. Explaining the reasons helps students avoid the same pitfalls, Ferrara said.

New Jersey lawmakers have also pushed for federal reforms, inspired by Seton Hall. In 2008, the Higher Education Opportunity Act became law, requiring schools to report fire safety data and policies every year.

And on Friday, Congressmen Bill Pascrell Jr. and Donald Payne will visit the Seton Hall campus to announce they are reintroducing the Campus Fire Safety Education Act to create a grant program for fire prevention and education programs at colleges.



Emergency fire vehicles surround a dormitory building at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., in this Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2000, file photo, where an early morning fire killed three people. Two former college students charged with setting the dorm fire reached a plea agreement with prosecutors Wednesday, Nov. 15, 2006, the day their trial was to begin. (Photo: MIKE DERER, AP)

Seton Hall said its own fire safety policy has "changed immensely" since the fire and serves as a model for other institutions. The policy is constantly reviewed and updated to reflect new trends. For instance, lamps with an extra outlet on them were recently added to the list of banned items because they often aren't surge-protected.

At monthly dorm meetings, resident assistants review how to get to the nearest exits and how to safely evacuate during a fire alarm in three minutes or less. At freshman orientation, students learn about the Boland Hall fire and the resulting policies, said university spokeswoman Laurie Pine.

On Sunday at 6 p.m., Seton Hall will mark the fire's 20th anniversary at its annual memorial Mass in the university chapel. Simons and Llanos plan to attend.

Llanos said he never imagined he'd be a motivational speaker since he always shied from the spotlight and worried about people seeing his scars after the fire.

"I'm grateful," he said, "to be able to give this testimony and help others."