



PRESSRELEASE

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For Immediate Release

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20th Anniversary of San Mateo Counties largest unsolved homicide - One of the deadliest residential structure fires in the Nation

April 26, 1997, twenty years ago, in the City of East Palo, at 6.09 am Firefighters with the Menlo Park Fire Protection District responded to one of the deadliest residential structure fires in the United States. To this day, it remains San Mateo Counties single largest unsolved multiple homicide.

Firefighters rescued 11 people from throughout the small single story residential structure On Fordham Street that day under extremely difficult and dangerous conditions. Ultimately saving 11 year old Devon and 37 year old Kenneth McKean, both who sustained burns and smoke inhalation.

Despite the firefighter's heroic efforts, nine people died, five of which were children. Among the dead, Jamaece Mosely, a child; Darcy Dixon, 4; Donte Price, 11; Angelika Rahiman, 6; Sonya McNack, 20; mother of Jamaece; Anthony Taylor, 9; Knita Rivers, 22; Bonnie Thompson, 40, mother of Kanita; and Alma Campbell, 59.

Also injured with burns and respiratory problems were Teresa Cotton, 28; and grandmother Verna Mae McKean, 78; who both had managed to escape the burning home before the firefighters arrival.

Three firefighters were injured fighting the fire, or performing rescues, one with smoke inhalation and two others with neck burns. In total seven people were injured, two significantly requiring rescue and nine perished in the fire.

On Saturday, April 29, 2017, members of the McKean and extended family along with neighbors and friends will hold a memorial service and celebration of life at the small home. Located at 2582 Fordham Street.

Working with the family, the Fire District will sponsor a free neighborhood smoke detector give away and installation event, scheduled for June 17, 2017. This event will be intended to remember and memorializing this tragic event, where a lack of working smoke detectors

played a roll along with non-releasable burgler bars in alerting family members to the fire and their ability to escape from the fire.

Immediately after the fire, the District surveyed both East Palo Alto and Menlo Park locating hundreds of homes with non-releasable window bars, double keyed entry door locks and no working smoke detectors. “With a lot of help from the community, donors and volunteers, we retrofitted hundreds of homes making them safer” Chief Schapelhouman said.

Menlo Park Fire Today:

Twenty years later, only a handful of firefighters, who were actually at the Fordham Fire, still work for the Fire District, most have retired. Firefighters Mike Shaffer, Anthony Morales, Rod Brovelli, Rex Ianson, Matt Pruitt, George Miller, Jeff Schreiber, John Shoffa and Harold Schapelhouman represent the remainder of a shrinking group of employees that year by year grows ever smaller.

Harold Schapelhouman was a Staff Captain in charge of Special Operations when the fire occurred and is now the Fire Chief. *“I responded from home and was first assigned as the morgue’s officer and then transitioned into the public information officer (PIO) for the fire and all subsequent activities that have occurred in the days, months and years afterwards”* he said.

“This is one of those emergencies that you never forget, despite how hard you try. What the fire crews did that day, the risks they took, the incredible effort they gave, the level of emotion and the tragic gravity of the situation that we all felt, will never be lost on me” the Chief said.

Mike Shaffer was the Captain on Engine 2 that morning, today he serves as a Division Chief in charge of all Training for the Fire District. Shaffer was the first fire officer on-scene that day. He recalls that he could see a large black column of smoke rising in the early morning dawn as they left the Fire Station at 2290 University Avenue, about half a mile away from the fire, as the dispatcher reported that up to 15 people could be trapped inside the structure.

Engine 2 arrived on-scene at 6.13 am on Fordham Street, Shaffer calmly radioed that he had a *“fully involved single story residential structure with heavy fire showing from the front of the home also involving two of five vehicles parked in the driveway underneath a carport located next to a garage and he would be aggressively assuming fire attack”*, despite the chaotic scene evolving in front of him.

He noted that as they attempted to knock the fire down with water from their hose line, it almost immediately would reignite. This was problematic because he knew time was a factor, they needed to gain access to the open front door and get inside the building, but their path was blocked by two vehicles that were on fire and located under a carport. They didn’t immediately realize that gasoline had intentionally been poured all over the vehicles before they were set on fire.

The crew of Engine 77 shattered the front plate glass window. Thick dark black smoke and heat poured out of the home, a dire sign of what was to come. Shaffer and the other firefighters made entry into the front room and first found a male adult victim and then a large female adult victim, which they carried to the front yard while more firefighters arrived, some of the fire paramedics were assigned to patient care as others made a push to breakdown a fence and get to the rear of the home, only to be confronted by several dogs and window bars. Ultimately, eleven people, six of which were children, were removed from the building.

Firefighter/Engineer **Anthony Morales** was the driver of Engine 77, he helped locate nine of the fire victims and was able to carry four of the six children out of the home making multiple trips in and out of the building despite being driven to the ground several times due to the fire, smoke and heat inside the structure. He recalls that all of the children's faces were covered in soot and it was in their noses and mouths, some were in the arms of their mothers when he found them laying on the floor of the home.

Firefighter/Paramedic **Rod Brovelli** was the rider on Quint 1 and is now a Captain, he assisted with two victim rescues and was directly involved with pulling two young women from the home and then assisted in helping to put out the fire out inside the building once the rescues were completed. He also attended to Verna McKean and Teresa Cotton who both survived the fire.

Firefighter/Engineer **Rex Ianson** was the driver of Rescue 1 and is now retired and one of five elected Board members for the Fire District. He assisted in the exterior firefight and kept the fire in check by protecting the front window opening with a "water curtain" as other firefighters rescued victims from the structure.

Firefighter/Engineer **Matt Pruitt** was the rider on Engine 5 which responded as part of a second alarm. He entered the front yard where eight victims were either being treated or had been declared as deceased by fire paramedics. He assisted in performing a secondary search of the home and found no other victims. He then assisting with extinguishing a remaining fire in the garage and fully extinguishing the vehicles in front of the home.

Firefighter/Paramedic **George Miller** is now retired but has been working on contract as the interim EMS Manager for the Fire District. Miller was the Acting Captain on Engine 6 which responded as part of a second alarm. He and his crew were directed to fully extinguish the carport, vehicles and garage. They later assisted with covering and preparing the nine deceased victims for the County Coroner.

Firefighter/Paramedic **Jeff Schreiber** is now a Captain, he was the driver on Engine 6 which responded as part of a second alarm. He was immediately tasked to work with several other fire paramedics to revive a male fire victim when he arrived on-scene.

Fire Investigator **John Shoffa** responded from home to the Fire, he is now retired but has been working on contract as a Fire Inspector for the Fire District a couple days a week. Shoffa was the lead fire investigator for the fire and was the first to determine that gasoline

had been used as an accelerant to start the fire and that the cause of the fire could be arson. He worked closely with Sheriffs Sergeant **Don O’Keefe**, who is now with the US Marshals Service.

Twenty years later the individual, or individuals, responsible for this fire have yet to be brought to justice Chief Schapelhouman points out. *“I recently contacted the DA’s office to see if they would re-open the case and give it one more try”* he said.

“Ten years ago I asked then, Captain Shaffer, if we should acknowledge the personnel who fought this fire. He said no, with only two survivors out of eleven people they had brought out of the building, it still didn’t feel right”, Chief Schapelhouman said.

Earlier this year, the majority of the remaining personnel and retirees were surprised when Chief Schapelhouman presented them with valor awards at the Fire District’s annual service awards luncheon. *“None of them ever wanted to be acknowledged for what they did that day. Trust me, saving anyone under those conditions was a remarkable collective effort under unbelievable circumstances, which is also an emotionally conflicted reality associated with a multiple loss fire where children are involved – They’re all heroes in my book and someone needed to finally tell them that in front of their peers”* the Chief said.

The Menlo Park Fire Protection District provides Fire and Emergency Services to the Town of Atherton, Cities of East Palo Alto and Menlo Park, portions of unincorporated San Mateo County and on contract to SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory.