2 OSU Students Die in Fire

Fraternity Initiation Debris Touched Off By Fireplace Sparks

1-8-76

By George and Melanie
De Vault
Of The Dispatch Staff

Two Ohio State University students died and another was severely burned when fire that began in piles of toilet paper used in initiation rites raced through their three-story fraternity house at 228 E. 17th Ave. about 2 a.m. Thursday.

Eighteen other members of Alpha Rho Chi, the coeducational professional fraternity for architecture students, escaped the flames unharmend. At least six leaped from second floor windows, witnesses said.

ABOUT SIX Columbus firemen suffered minor injuries in battling the blaze.

One of the victims was tentatively identified as James Mitchell, 20, whose body was found in his second floor bedroom at the southwest corner of the building, Columbus police said.

The OSU student directory lists a James Nelson Mitchell as a junior from Washington, Pa.

THE OTHER victim, a woman, had not been identified early Thursday. Police said they had a name for the woman, but added her body was so badly burned that fraternity members could not positively identify her.

Detective Sgt. Ralph Arnett said police were checking OSU dental records in hopes of making positive identification.

The woman's body was found in a second floor hallway where she was apparently overcome by heat and smoke while trying to awaken others, firemen said.

In critical condition at University Hospital was Mark Heinz, 18. He was being treated for second and third degree burns over 50 percent of his body, firemen said. The directory lists him as a resident of Toledo, Ohio, and a student in the University College.

HEINZ'S CLOTHING was set ablaze as he ran through the flames and out the front door, witnesses said.

Firemen reported that Dana K. Mosner of 6619 Lileb St., received burns.

Several students received oxygen at the scene.

Chief Ray Devine said the fire, which completely gutted the fraternity house, started in toilet paper that had been spread nearly a foot deep over the first floor of the building during "hell week" initiation activities.

PLEDGES, DEVINE said, had been left in charge of cleaning up the house and started a fire in a fireplace to dispose of the paper.

Sparks jumped out of the fireplace, ignited the toilet paper and fire covered the whole first floor "almost instantly," the chief said.

"The whole front was lit up when we pulled up," Devine said.

"One guy here saw the fire and called the fire department," said Rick Smudz, a senior in finance at OSU, who was in his Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house across the street. Smudz and fraternity brother Jeff Yocca, a junior in administrative science, said they were among the first to help.

THE PAIR grabbed fire extinguishers and rushed across the street.

"It was horrible," Yocca said. "The whole first floor was on fire by the time we saw it. Flames were shooting out about six to eight feet from the windows and we saw people jumping out of the upstairs windows."

The fire extinguishers, Yocca said, were as useless as "pea shooters."

Smudz said he and Yocca kicked open the front door and were immediately driven back by heat and flames.

"THEN ONE guy came rushing out with a fire extinguisher in his hand," Smudz said.

"One guy (Heinz) came out on fire — it was the worst I'd ever seen. I never felt so helpless," Yocca said. "It really shakes you up — you never expect it so close to you."

The men said they were told a woman who had been trying to wake everyone up was trapped on an upstairs floor "and we couldn't get in any way. It was horrible. One girl collapsed about 20 feet from the door."

MEMBERS OF Phi Gamma Delta and the Red Cross set up an emergency center for survivors of the fire and firemen in the Phi Gamma Delta house.

Devine said the fire, which shot up the walls into the second and third floors and through the roof, was hard to put out because firemen could not get at the flames.

FREEZING temperatures also hampered firemen by freezing regulators on oxygen masks and knocking out their radios.

The chief said firemen had the fire under control about 4 a.m. Firemen were still on the scene after dawn, hosing down "hot spots" in the house.
Fraternity tragedy begins as initiation activities end

By Mark Sroufe

"I thought they were behind me."

Vicki L. Toms, 22, a senior from Farmersville, and James M. Mitchell, 20, a junior from Washington, Pa., were not, however. Both died from smoke inhalation and extensive burns early Thursday morning in a fire which swept through the Alpha Rho Chi coed fraternity house, 229 E. 17th Ave.

THEODORE SIAWELSKI of Newark was one of the students in the house when it caught fire. Mitchell was his roommate.

"We were in my room," Siawelski said. "I ran for my closet to get my coat. The smoke was too much so I dropped it and ran for the window.

"I thought they were behind me," he added.

Mitchell and Toms were dead on arrival at University Hospital at 5 a.m. Thursday, the Franklin County Coroner's Office said.

Mark Heinz, a UVC student from Toledo, received severe burns over more than half his body and was in critical condition at University Hospital at 1 a.m. today.

FIRE OFFICIALS said Toms, who lived on the third floor of the architectural fraternity with two other women, ran to the second floor to wake everyone and was trapped by flames in the hallway and overcome by smoke.

Brad Quicksall, public information officer for the Columbus Division of Fire, said Toms' actions helped several people escape from the building. "They might not have gotten out otherwise," he said.

Fire officials said the blaze started in the living room where three or four of the fraternity's initiates were burning some scraps of paper left over from Thursday's initiation activities. The paper, covering the floor of the entire room, was almost a foot deep, said Ray Devine, Columbus Division of Fire battalion chief.

DEVINE SAID there was no protective screen on the fireplace where the paper was burning and some of the sparks flew out, igniting the paper on the floor. Two couches that had been moved near the fireplace caught fire and the blaze spread despite attempts of the fraternity members to contain it with fire extinguishers.

Witnesses said most of the fraternity's 15 members and visitors were on the second and third floors when the fire broke out, forcing them to jump from their bedroom windows.

Fire officials said 16 pieces of fire fighting equipment from Rescue Unit 2 and Squad 7 were on the scene. Firefighters were unable to control the blaze until 4 a.m., and several trucks remained well after daybreak to make sure the blaze was extinguished.

Quicksall said firefighters had difficulty reaching the fire because the stairwell leading to the upper floors had been gutted.
OSU community aids fire victims

By Marilyn Geewax

Members of the University community, from campus administrators to concerned neighbors, joined Thursday in an attempt to aid survivors of the fire which killed two students and critically injured another at the Alpha Rho Chi fraternity house, 229 E. 17th Ave.

Even before dawn, people were at the scene of the fire which gutted the house causing damages estimated at $30,000. Campuswide support and aid was offered to the residents of the architectural fraternity.

Heading the support group are alumni of the School of Architecture who late Thursday pledged $1,500 to aid the survivors of the fire. This pledge was added to the $500 donated earlier by the School of Architecture.

THE SCHOOL has set up an “Immediate Relief Fund” to provide financial support to the students and is requesting donations, Laurence C. Gercken, director of the School of Architecture, said.

Although the fraternity is not under the auspices of the Office of Greek Affairs, Barbara J. Toot, coordinator of Greek Affairs, was notified of the fire at 6 a.m. Thursday.

Tootle said, "The other fraternities and sororities feel a kinship with all fraternities, especially since Alpha Rho Chi is right in the neighborhood."

She said, “The phone calls were really coming in” Thursday morning from the social fraternities and sororities. “One sorority offered to go door to door to collect money,” she added.

Tootle said a collection for clothing and money was taken up at all fraternities and sororities at dinner Thursday night. “We’re investigating all housing possibilities for the 13 students,” she said. “They would like to stay together if it’s possible.”

THE STUDENT Financial Aid Office also responded by waiving the $50 limit on emergency loans to the students. “We will do anything in our power to help,” Earl E. Dowling, loan director of financial aids, said. “We are part of students’ services and service is a mighty big word,” he said.

Alpha Rho Chi alumni rushed to the aid of the fire victims. Alumnus Gene Milhoan, 6009 Olentangy River Rd., said the students would need financial aid because of the “tremendous loss of drawing equipment” and because the students needed “places to stay.”

The survivors spent the night in the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house leaving at approximately 8 a.m. Thursday to stay with family and friends.

MILHOAN said the alumni had not yet decided what they are going to do for the students but were sure they would offer a great deal of help.

In addition to the immediate physical needs, the Office of Counseling and Consultation Services is prepared to help the victims cope with the psychological impact of the fire. Robert D. Archibald, director of counseling services, said.

The 13 surviving students met at the home of fraternity president John Behal Thursday afternoon. Two university counselors joined them to “help them make some kind of decisions” and counsel them “either as a group or as individuals.”
Icicles hang from rafters and debris litters the fireplace in the living room of the Alpha Rho Chi fraternity house following Thursday's fire.
The Aftermath: Quiet horror

'It was a great personal loss to so many people'

By Marilyn Geewax

"I cried for an hour before I could even come into the office. Laurence C. Gerckens, director of the school of architecture, looked down at his hands and continued his soft words, "It's such a terrible tragedy."

The role of tough administrator with all the answers never fits quite right in times of real tragedy. Gerckens needed no role, his compassion and concern seeped out in every sentence. His concern was for the "parents and family of the students" who died and for providing for the survivors of the holocaust.

"IT WAS A great personal loss to so many people," he said. The students in architecture are closer to each other than in many other schools, he explained, because they, so often stay up together all night working on projects. Sorrow weighed heavily on his voice. The students who died "were known to so many people in the school," he said. "This was an immediate loss for a great many of us."

"It's just really hard to take," said Linda S. Wieneke, a junior from Middletown and a member of the fraternity. "I had just left about a half hour before the fire." She looked way, "They just have what's on their backs."

THE STUDENTS living at Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house were among the first people arriving at the site of the fire. The next morning brought the reality for them. Two students were dead and one critically burned. The terror had ended and the nightmare began.

"I was astonished at first," said Todd Hampton, a senior from Akron. It was all confusion at first but then the mood became "subdued," he said. "Everyone was so shocked."

SHAKING HIS head, Richard W. Gordon, a freshman from Copley, said, "You're just so dumbfounded. I was just watching TV when I heard the yelling." He glanced out of the window as he had done the night before. A charred shell, of a house remained.

Rick Smudz, a graduate in finance, was one of the first few people to rush to the fire. The next morning his eyes were rimmed with exhaustion. "One of the guys saw the flames and woke me up," he said. "No, I haven't been to sleep yet." It was now 9 a.m.

DURING THE day, fraternity brothers sat around the house playing cards and talking about the fire. It couldn't be avoided. The burned out windows of Alpha Rho Chi stared at them like the empty sockets of a skull. All day the phone rang — reporters, families of Alpha Rho Chi members, the curious. It will be a while before things return to normal.

Eyewitnesses relate horrors of frat house inferno

While the University issued official statements and people shook their heads, men and women who actually experienced the Alpha Rho Chi fire were left to the quiet horror of their own memories.

Three members of the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity were among the first people at the scene of the fire. They were Richard W. Gordon, a freshman from Copley, Richard Allen Smudz, a graduate from Columbus, and Jeffrey R. Yocca, a junior from Columbus.

"IT WAS about 2 a.m. and I was watching TV," Gordon said. "I heard some yelling so I looked out the window. I saw him (Mark Heinz of Alpha Rho Chi and in critical condition) jump through the front window, and he was on fire."

Gordon yelled to his roommate. Yocca, and then called the fire department. "We ran out in our underwear," Yocca said. "They were jumping on the windows and yelling." By then Smudz had joined them in the Alpha Rho Chi lawn.

"SOMEBODY SAID a girl was missing so we (Gordon and Yocca) tried to push the door open. We were kicking it," Yocca said. "There were two fire extinguishers laying in the snow so we grabbed the big one. When we pushed the door open a draft made the smoke and flames shoot up.

"We got out and ran to the side porch. I tried to get to the second floor by climbing a tree, but flames shot out," Yocca said. Gordon added, "the windows were black. We couldn't see anything inside.
Fire survivors find housing as community aid continues

By Marilyn Geewax and Mark Sroufe

For the 13 survivors of Thursday morning's fire at the Alpha Rho Chi fraternity house, 229 E. 17th Ave., the long road back to normality has begun.

The immediate problem of new housing has already been solved for the fraternity members. They will be moving to 219 E. 17th Ave., the house next door to their former fraternity building.

"OUR PLAN is to move into the new house just as soon as the tenants move out," John Behal, a senior from Columbus and president of the fraternity, said. "That should be at the beginning of this week."

Behal said Alpha Rho Chi already owns the new house. "We bought the house for expansion purposes last fall," he said. "It was a great place and it added to the value of our own original property.

THE FRATERNITY members continued staying with friends and family over the weekend, Behal said, and began sorting out what they have left and what they will need.

Behal said the fraternity's insurance company would take care of the house but the individual members would have to claim their personal losses through their own insurance agencies.

Help has been pouring in from all over the community since the morning of the fire. Several area churches have offered food, clothing and shelter, Behal said.

Laurence C. Gerckens, director of the School of Architecture, said the monetary contributions alone have amounted to more than $3,400. "The School of Architecture Alumni Association has donated $1,500, and the School of Architecture has given $500," he said.

The various fraternities and sororities have donated more than $600, and individual contributions from students, faculty and members of the administration have ranged from $1 to $200, he said.

GERCKENS SAID a check for $200 from the "Immediate Relief Fund" has been given to each of the fraternity's members to cover their immediate needs.

BEHAL SAID the University community's prompt and generous action has greatly helped the survivors in this period of transition. The concern everyone has shown has helped boost the fraternity's morale, he said. "Right now I think the strongest sentiment is hopefulness... this group is going to bounce back."

The 13 Alpha Rho Chi members surviving are: John Behal, a senior from Columbus; Sue Grapes, a sophomore from Elyria; Valerie L. Hall, a sophomore from Dublin; Robert Johnson, a sophomore from Libertyville, Ill.; Bruce Knepper, a junior from Murrysville, Pa.; Lawrence Lavrich, a senior from Chardon, Ohio; Kevin McDonough, a junior from Rochester, N.Y.; Richard LeBlanc, a sophomore from Barton, Vt.; Daniel Roe, a junior from Washington, Pa.; Robert H. Rubenstein, a junior from Columbus; Andrew N. Share, a junior from Syracuse, N.Y.; and Theodore Siawelski, a senior from Newark, Del.; and Mark Heinz, a UVC student from Toledo, who was in critical condition at University Hospital at 1 a.m. today as a result of burns he received in the fire.
Funeral services set for two fire victims

Funerals of two Ohio State students killed in the early morning fire that swept through the Alpha Rho Chi fraternity house Thursday have been set for today.

Graveside services will be held for Vicki L. Toms at the Hope Cemetery in Farmersville at 11 a.m. Visitors may call at the Swart Funeral Home in West Carlton before 10 a.m.

Toms is survived by her parents, Kathryn and Kermit Toms of Farmersville; a brother, Danny, of West Warlton; and two sisters, Mrs. Jean Zink of West Carlton and Mrs. Nancy Cook of Westerville.

Services for James Nelson Mitchell will be held at the Barnhill Funeral Home in Washington, Pa., at 1:30 p.m. Burial at Washington Cemetery will follow the services.

Mitchell is survived by his parents, John N. and Wilma Stewart Mitchell, of Washington, Pa.; a sister, Karen June Mitchell, of Pittsburgh; and a grandmother, Bess Stewart, of Washington, Pa.

James Nelson Mitchell, a junior from Washington, Pa., was killed in the Alpha Rho Chi fraternity house fire Thursday, not James M. Mitchell, as reported in Friday's Lantern. The Lantern regrets the error.
Six weeks after Alpha Rho Chi fire...

Survivor recalls night of horror

By Marilyn Geewax
2-19-76

A shriek of terror shattered Mark Heinz's quiet sleep as flames broke through the walls of his home.

"Get out of the house! Get out of the house!" someone was screaming.

Heinz got out of the house, but his sleep is still being interrupted. Pain from his burns and skin graft treatment wake him now.

Heinz, 19, critically burned in the Alpha Rho Chi fire Jan. 8, was confined to a University Hospital bed for the last six weeks waiting to heal. He was released Wednesday and has returned to his Toledo home where he continues therapy.

"We were having Hell Week and it was the first night," Heinz said, in an interview with the Lantern last week. When the party began breaking up around 12:45 a.m., he said, "we started getting down on the pledges. We told them to clean the place up and burn the paper in the fireplace."

HEINZ REMEMBERS going to bed around 1:30 a.m. His bedroom was on the second floor of the house facing East 17th Avenue. He went to sleep wearing only his under shorts.

"There was about six inches of newspaper and stuff on the floor (of the living room) and I guess it caught on fire," he said.

"Some guy yelled 'get out of the house' so I got out of bed and put on a pair of pants and one shoe. The entire top half of Heinz's body is a bright, deep red now. So is the left foot that was bare.

Heinz recalled running out of his bedroom and finding flames and black smoke sweeping up the stairs near his room. He turned and ran down the hall to the back fire escape.

"Some girl I really don't know who, yelled 'the fire escape is stuck!' so I ran back toward my room. I kept yelling the whole time so my lungs didn't fill with smoke. The smoke and balls of fire were shooting up the stairs.

"Out of the corner of my eye, I saw I was on fire."

HEINZ RAN back into his room and rolled around on the floor. "I thought I was out so I jumped through the window because it was pushed open." Heinz's roommate, Andrew Share, had already opened the window and jumped.

"I did a flip in the air and landed on my tailbone in the snow," Witnesses said Heinz was still burning when he dove through the window.

"I wanted to get away from the fire, so I started walking out to the street. I just got into somebody's car to sit down," Heinz said.

The temperature that night was 15 degrees, the northwest wind a steady 17 m.p.h. There was about an inch of snow on the ground and more falling.

"I was probably the last one out," Heinz said.

Two other fraternity members, Vicki L. Toms and James N. Mitchell, never got out. They burned to death.

"It happened so fast, maybe two or three minutes. It's funny, I didn't feel a thing for about 15 minutes."

An ambulance took Heinz to University Hospital where doctors began treating him. "The skin was hanging from my fingers," Heinz said, looking at his lobster-red hands tipped with long white fingernails.

"Being burned has to be the worst thing I can think of. You can't believe how it hurt when they put the medicine on."

IN TOLEDO that night, Leonard and Dorothy Heinz were asleep. At 2:30 a.m. they received a call from Columbus. Their son was badly burned.

"It was the longest drive in my life," Leonard Heinz said. "It took us five and a half hours to get here because of road conditions. I didn't know if he was going to live or die."

For about four days, no one knew whether Mark would live or die.

Mark was in the University Hospital burn unit for about a week, then was transferred to a private room.

"I'm starting to heal," he said last week. "I've begun therapy, too." Except for parts of his shoulders, his skin is not permanently scarred. His hair and face escaped serious injury, but his arms and trunk are scarlet, raw with blisters.

Last Wednesday, doctors grafted skin from Heinz's hip to his shoulder. He had to lie absolutely still for three days, hoping the skin would heal. The pain was excruciating.

His parents sat, naped, stared, fidgeted in chairs on either side of his bed. His mother spent most of every day in his room. His father, a radiologist, visited every weekend and whenever else he was free.

Dorothy Heinz rarely took an eye off her thin, blond son. However, she knows the ordeal is still not over.

HEINZ SAID, "I plan to go back to school Spring Quarter. My skin is going to be like this for two or three years. I just have to get used to it."

Heinz, a sophomore, intends to become an architect. When he does come back he is hoping to move to North Campus where he stayed last year. There is no room for him in the new, smaller Alpha Rho Chi fraternity house.

"I'm getting pretty bored. I'm ready to get out and get started on school again."
5 months later: Charred frat establishes memorial funds

By Jean Kolk

It is nearly five months since fire swept through the Alpha Rho Chi fraternity house killing two students. The charred ruins have since been leveled and the fraternity has relocated. The only reminders of the blaze are the students who survived.

Members of Alpha Rho Chi, a professional architecture fraternity, now reside at 219 E. 17th Ave., immediately west of the house destroyed by the Jan. 8 fire. Thirteen students live in the new house, and the fraternity has purchased a 214 E. 16th Ave. house to accommodate students this fall.

According to Bruce C. Knepper, president of Alpha Rho Chi, it is a definite goal of fraternity members to construct a new house.

"Living in two houses breaks your fraternity in half," Knepper said. "We're going to start a development fund very soon."

The fire took the lives of Vicki L. Toms, 22, a senior from Farmersville, and James N. Mitchell, 20, a junior from Washington, Pa.

As a memorial to the two fraternity members, Alpha Rho Chi plans to restore an old piano which was almost destroyed by the fire, Knepper said.

"TOMS AND MITCHELL were both avid piano fans," he said, "and the fraternity felt that restoration of the piano would be a fitting tribute."

According to Knepper, $3,200 is needed to restore the piano, and about $500 has already been collected.

A Toms-Mitchell Memorial Award has been established by the Student Chapter of the American Institute of Architecture, according to Laurence C. Gereckens, director of the School of Architecture.

Gereckens said the award will be given June 11 to a student making a significant contribution to the School of Architecture. He said it was still undecided whether the award will be a book, a commemorative plaque or monetary.

MARK F. HEINZ, a sophomore from Toledo, was critically injured in the fire, which burned 60 per cent of his skin from the waist up. After about six weeks of hospitalization, Heinz returned to school Spring Quarter. He plans to enter the School of Architecture next fall.

"I see a doctor about once a month," Heinz said.

THE COST of rebuilding the house was estimated at $80,000, according to Robert Nichols, an alumni of Alpha Rho Chi and treasurer of Demetrios Control Corporation which owns Alpha Rho Chi property.

Nichols said the fraternity received a premium of about $34,000 from their insurance company, which was the total extent of their coverage. The premium was used to
Fraternity fire case defendants dropped; insurer asks judge to reconsider decision

By Ellen H. Brown

Two former OSU students may be called back as defendants in a $36,000 fire-damage case if a Franklin County Court of Common Pleas judge reverses his Sept. 1 decision to dismiss them from the suit.

The Westerfield Insurance Co. on Tuesday asked Judge William Gillie to reinstate Gregory Johnston and Thomas Trout, former members of the Alpha Rho Chi fraternity as defendants, claiming that they were partially responsible for a 1976 fire that occurred in the fraternity house.

Gillie has dismissed Johnston and Trout as defendants, claiming that the insurance company lacks sufficient evidence to prove their responsibility for the fire.

Gillie's decision was made in response to requests by Johnston and Trout to be dismissed from the case.

The insurance company filed the suit in January 1980, accusing the fraternity and 14 of its members and pledges of negligently starting a fire in January 1976.

The company said the fraternity owes them $36,000 because negligent fires are not covered under its insurance policy.

It claimed that Alpha Rho Chi pledges and members started a fire Jan. 8, 1976 by pushing paper litter into their fireplace. The insurance company said the fraternity pledges and members put the paper into the fireplace while cleaning the house after holding an initiation ceremony the previous night.

Westerfield Insurance Co. held an insurance policy with Demetrios Control Corp. that leased the house to the fraternity in 1976.

After the insurance company filed suit against the fraternity, fraternity members and pledges filed motions denying responsibility for the fire.

One defendant asked the court to consolidate the case, since the insurance company said all defendants were guilty of the same actions in the fire.

Other defendants have sought removal from the case, claiming that they were involved in other activities when the fire started, but Gillie denied their requests.
What a mess

Members of Sigma Chi and Alpha Gamma Sigma play each other in mud volleyball during the sixth annual Oozeball Tournament Saturday. The tournament was sponsored by Chi Omega, Alpha Rho Chi and Delta Sigma Phi in order to raise money for the Ohio Cancer Research Fund.