

# After the Fire

**Two decades ago, an inferno at the Indianapolis Athletic Club claimed the lives of three people, two of them firefighters. The tragedy awakened the city to its neglect of fire safety and reshaped IFD. But the knowledge came at a terrible price.**

*Amy Wimmer Scharb – 2012, febr 1 - [BRON](#)*

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**Even now**, on off-duty drives through downtown, some of them will seek another route, any other route, to avoid the shadow of the nine-story building at Meridian and Vermont streets. For most of the city, the Indianapolis Athletic Club is an elegant landmark from an earlier time, an old-boy haven where Democratic Party elites once hosted parties and presidents. But for firefighters who crouched in its halls 20 years ago, it is still an imposing reminder of one of the Indianapolis Fire Department's darkest nights.

"I'll avoid that intersection when I can," says Keith Smith, who served as IFD chief from 1992 to 2000. "It's a night I don't care to remember all the time."



***Pictured: From Meridian Street, IFD personnel could see fire through the Athletic Club's third-floor windows.***

Just after midnight on February 5, 1992, firefighters arrived at 350 North Meridian Street to investigate a report of smoke inside the Athletic Club. In the moments that followed, the men and women of IFD would battle two intense blazes. When the smoke cleared, the club remained, its trademark blue awning unscathed. But across Meridian Street, *The Indianapolis Star* would note, three firefighters sat on the curb, sobbing.

The Indianapolis Fire Department had lost two of its own—IFD's first line-of-duty deaths in 23 years—and one of the Athletic Club's hotel guests. Four firefighters sustained serious injuries, two with severe burns that required months of rehabilitation. Several guests were injured as well.

Today, 20 years later, the Athletic Club fire has largely faded from the city's collective memory. But the events of that night touched off a firestorm of change in a big-city fire department that, at the time, still had a lot of growing up to do. In short, the Athletic Club changed the way the Indianapolis Fire Department does business. And the young up-and-comers who fought the inferno, now in top leadership positions, have spent their careers trying to pass on the lessons it taught them.

"In every recruitment class, we still share thoughts about the Athletic Club fire," says IFD Captain Doug Abernathy, among those on duty that night. "They know it because we teach from it. Every single one of them, everybody on this job, knows about the Athletic Club fire. The knowledge we learned, we still embrace and hold onto. That fire is very much alive."



**The evening** of February 4, 1992, arrived quietly enough at the Athletic Club—surprising, considering that the place was making even more noise than usual that winter. In January, the usual cadre of Democratic legislators, in town for the new session of the Indiana General Assembly, had descended on the venerable club with characteristic pomp. (Republicans, of course, preferred the Columbia Club on Monument Circle.)

But this year the legislators, normally the Athletic Club's main newsmaking guests, were overshadowed by a sensational courtroom drama: Heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson was standing trial in Indianapolis, charged with raping a Miss Black America pageant contestant in the city the previous summer. The jurors were sequestered at the Athletic Club.

The club was no stranger to notoriety. Founded by a group of Indianapolis businessmen to “promote clean sports, amusement, and sociability,” the club saw construction of its Meridian Street facility begin in 1922. Prominent members included pharmaceutical magnate Eli Lilly, publishing tycoon Eugene C. Pulliam, and Indiana Governor Paul McNutt. Over the years, the club's guestbook would be even more impressive than the membership, with visits from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson. Benny Goodman spent the night in 1939 and played his clarinet for swimmers at the pool. In 1943, Archduke Otto von Hapsburg, heir to the throne in Austria-Hungary before the Nazis took over, hosted a family reunion at the club. When Tony Hulman purchased the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1945, he signed the papers there.

As dusk descended on the city, that February evening in 1992 looked to be just another page in the club's colorful, storied history. Bailiffs led the Tyson jurors to their sixth-floor rooms after a long afternoon at trial. Legislators straggled in from a contentious day of Statehouse deal-making.

On the third floor, a member of the club's waitstaff closed down the barroom and left at about 5:30 p.m.

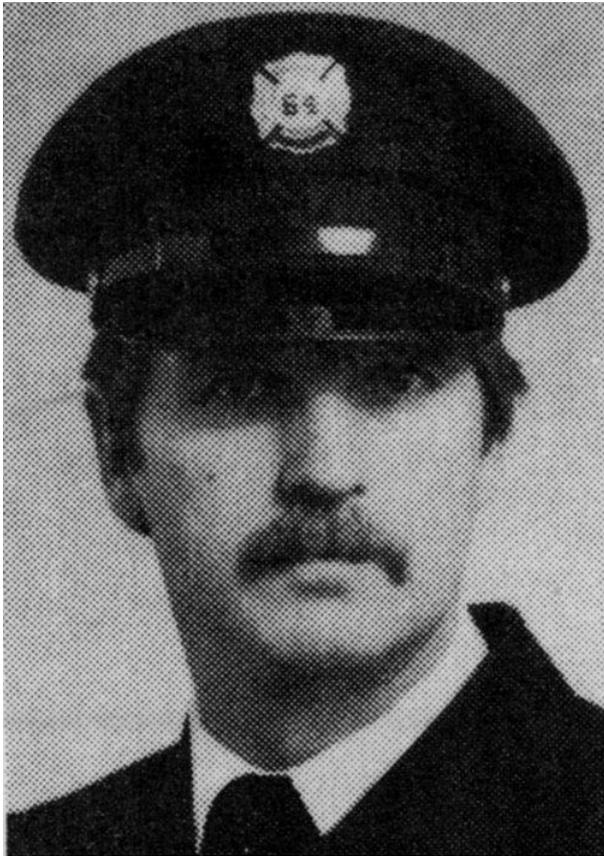
Sometime later that night, in the dark, empty bar, an electrical malfunction—a plug? the wiring?—occurred in the vicinity of a small refrigerator. Then, a spark.



**At Station** No. 13, on West Ohio Street, Corporal Ellwood “Woody” Gelenius, a 47-year-old IFD veteran, and his compatriots were settling in for the night. They slid a spaghetti Western, the Yul Brynner vehicle *Adios Sabata*, into the VCR.

A divorced father of four daughters, Gelenius had grown up in New Jersey. He was named after an uncle who was a firefighter; another uncle was a former fire chief. Gelenius had moved to Indianapolis in the late 1960s to take a job with Indiana Gas. But like so many men

in his family, he turned to firefighting. His girls delighted in having a fireman for a father. He would occasionally bring a firetruck to their westside home, wailing the sirens and thrilling neighborhood kids.



***Pictured: Corporal Woody Gelenius***

But Gelenius was serious-minded, and he sometimes questioned the department's leadership. Founded as a paid force in 1859, IFD was more than 130 years old, but in some areas its policies and procedures didn't reflect its mature age. By 1992, the city had a tidy portfolio of high-rise buildings, yet IFD had no formal plan for combatting high-rise fires. Communication and leadership at scenes were often haphazard. And, more troubling to Gelenius, many fire-fighters had poor equipment. "There were a few people rubbed the wrong way by him," says daughter Tracy Gelenius. "He kept telling them their gear was very subpar."

Gelenius's pleadings had little effect. In 1990, 1991, and 1992, for example, the city turned down IFD requests to buy fire-retardant hoods. When recruits joined the department, they received two uniforms, a collection of used turnout gear, and an annual clothing allowance of \$200. Until they could afford to buy their own firefighting attire (and it was expensive), they often relied on hand-me-downs from more-seasoned colleagues. "All our stuff was used—it was dark and dingy and worn-out," says Abernathy, who joined the department in 1988. "Some of us didn't even have flashlights. We just didn't. It was something we were supposed to purchase ourselves." Assembling an adequate firefighting getup could take years. And even then, only supervisors had radios.

The worst-equipped firefighters tended to be the “subs”—inexperienced recruits who floated from station to station until they got permanent assignments. In February 1992, one of those subs was Private John Lorenzani. A 29-year-old Franklin College graduate and the youngest of eight children from an eastside family, Lorenzani had a big smile and a goofy sense of humor. He and his wife, Barbara, a pretty blonde who worked as a paralegal at a downtown bank, had been married by the fire department’s chaplain in 1990. They lived in a little white house with blue shutters in Irvington and had just welcomed their first child to the family, Anne Maria—or “Annie,” as they called her.

On the evening of February 4, Lorenzani was posted at station No. 7, on North New Jersey Street. At about 11 p.m., around the time Golenius and his fellow firefighters were watching a movie at station No. 13, Lorenzani called home to say goodnight to Barbara. “Love you,” she said before hanging up the phone. “See you in the morning.” She had picked up Annie’s first portraits earlier that day, and before going to bed had slipped one into a frame and left it on the dining-room table, where John would see it when he got home.



**At 11:45 p.m.**, the front-desk clerk at the Athletic Club left his post for a piece of pie. When he returned to the lobby, he gave a quizzical look to the security guard. *Do you smell something?* Together, they walked the first floor until they found smoke coming out of a vent.

The guard headed off to the sixth floor to alert the bailiffs responsible for the Tyson jurors. The desk clerk dialed 911. Dispatchers received the call at 12:06 a.m. and alerted the nearest IFD stations.

A truck from station No. 7, including John Lorenzani, was the first to arrive at the scene. Captain Mike Spalding made an initial report to dispatch: “Nothing showing. Will investigate.” The desk clerk told Spalding that the building’s fire-alert panel suggested an alarm was going off in the basement. Spalding grabbed Lorenzani—he wanted the sub to stay close so he could keep an eye on him—and the two headed downstairs, where they found “cold smoke” that had been recirculated through air vents, but no fire.



***Pictured: (l-r) Tracy Gelenius, Joe Cougan Jr., and Tammy Cougan***

While Spalding and Lorenzano were exploring the basement, the truck from station No. 13 arrived at the Athletic Club, and another team of firefighters, including Woody Gelenius, headed upstairs, also in search of the smoke's source. As they climbed the stairs, the Tyson jurors, watched closely by two bailiffs, filed past them on their way out of the building. Gelenius and company proceeded to the second floor and found water dripping from the ceiling. Thinking there must be sprinklers on the level above them, they headed up to the third floor.

There, the stairwell opened into a long corridor. At the eastern end was a large dining room that overlooked Meridian Street. To the north of the corridor, facing Vermont Street, was a smaller banquet hall known as the McHale Room, which was separated from the dining room by a small barroom.

When Gelenius and the other firefighters stepped onto the third floor, they did not, in fact, find sprinklers; a damaged water hose in the barroom was leaking through the ceiling below. But at 12:17 a.m., they spotted the fire. A Dutch door, with top and bottom halves that opened independently, led into the barroom from an enclave off of the corridor. Through the door, they could see the glow of flames in the barroom beyond. At 12:20 a.m., Gelenius sent another report over the radio. "The whole room is engulfed," he said.

With the fire located, the battle started taking shape. Other firefighters from Gelenius's unit found a hose cabinet in the corridor, an old-fashioned fire-protection device with 100 feet of

hose line. Two young privates in Gelenius's group tried to remove that hose and replace it with their own. When that failed, they stretched the club's hose toward the barroom and cobbled their hose onto the end of it. Other firefighters in the group forced open both entrances to the barroom—the Dutch door and the barroom's main door leading into the McHale Room. They delivered the first drops of water to the flame more than 13 minutes after the initial responders had pulled up in front of the building.

Doug Abernathy turned to the other firefighters with him on the third floor of the Athletic Club. "If the fire is out," he asked, "why is it still hot in here?"

But just as they began to douse the flames, the makeshift coupling that connected the club's hose to the department's hose separated. With no water, the firefighters tried to contain the blaze by closing the doors that led from the barroom to the McHale Room, and then retreated back into the corridor to reattach the hoses. But the Dutch door on the other side of the barroom remained open, and by the time they resumed their attack, the blaze had spread. They had to fight through new flames to get back to the fire's epicenter in the barroom.

As Gelenius and the rest of the crew struggled to tame the blaze on the third floor, a team from Engine 1 prepared to assist their fellow firefighters. But before they could get there, a bailiff approached the unit's commander, at 12:21 a.m., to tell him that a Tyson juror was missing; the bailiffs had left one of them behind as they hurried the rest out of the building. So instead of going to the fire, the reinforcements went to the sixth floor.



**E**ven without the benefit of backups, the firefighters on the third floor were finally having some success. At 12:25 a.m., they managed to break out a window on the north end of the building, in the dining room adjacent to the barroom, and brought in a hose from a ladder extended from the street.

Now armed with water, the firefighters beat down the blaze in the McHale Room, on the north side of the building, and were attacking the fire at its source in the barroom. In the meantime, the crew from Engine 1 found the wayward juror and rushed back out of the building. Finally, IFD seemed to have control of the situation. "The fire was out, save for a couple of little spot fires," recalls Abernathy, one of the firefighters battling the blaze. "I was able to look out onto Vermont and see the streetlights, and I thought, 'Wow, we got this bad boy knocked.'"

The change in fortune came just in time: One by one, the vibrating alarms on their air tanks started to signal that they were nearing empty. The firefighters had only enough time to make their way out of the building and get fresh tanks. Abernathy dropped low to the floor. "Whoa, that's some hot smoke," he thought.

Then, the reality hit him. "If the fire is out," he said to the others, the words muffled by his air mask, "why is it still hot in here?"



**H**aving failed to find a fire in the basement, Spalding and Lorenzano climbed a stairwell to the third floor. They emerged in the corridor as Gelenius and others were getting the barroom blaze under control. The smoke was black, thick, and hot. The two men put on their air masks. “Stay close,” Spalding said. Lorenzano nodded in response.

Suddenly, without warning, the building’s power went out. Until then, the firefighters on the third floor had been working with the benefit of light. Now, darkness.

As Spalding and Lorenzano tried to find their way along the corridor, Abernathy approached them in the half-light. He was trying to make his way through the smoke—still oddly hot, he thought—and out of the building to replace his waning air tank.

“Hey, Captain, can you help me find my way to the stairs?” Abernathy asked Spalding. “I’m running out of air.”

“I think it’s that way,” Spalding replied, pointing toward a stairwell behind them in the corridor. “We’re going to go this way,” Spalding continued, pointing east toward the barroom and dining room.

Spalding and Lorenzano left Abernathy behind and hurried, crouching, toward the dining room. At its entrance, they encountered Gelenius, who had been fighting the blaze nonstop. His helmet was off, and he wasn’t crouching below the smoke as he should have been. He seemed disoriented. “I grabbed him by his left arm and pulled him down,” Spalding says. “I thought, ‘He’s going to need some help getting to the stairs and back down.’”

Meanwhile, Abernathy crawled along the corridor, in the direction of the stairwell Spalding had pointed him to moments earlier. He felt the shape of a stairway and tried to tell his colleagues. “I got the stairs here!” he yelled into his mask. “I got the stairs here!” He stumbled down the steps as Spalding and Lorenzano tried to help Gelenius. Then he left the building to get a fresh air tank.

When Abernathy walked back into the building, he heard screams coming from the floors above.

**When the Athletic Club** was constructed, the third-floor barroom and the adjoining McHale Room had plaster ceilings, about two inches thick and supported by a wire-and-mesh frame. Originally, that ceiling and the floor above it had been fireproof. Over the years, the installation of new surfaces and mechanical equipment had left a large open space above the barroom ceiling, out of sight of the firefighters who thought they had beaten back the fire.

“At some point in its growth,” read a December 1992 report in the *National Fire Protection Association Journal*, “the barroom fire damaged the suspended ceiling assembly and ignited ceiling tiles glued to the original plaster ceiling.”

Firefighters were battling the fire they could see. But above their heads—in the unseen cavities above the ceiling—another blaze was raging unchecked.

Suddenly, the ceiling erupted in a flashover—all of its exposed surfaces ignited simultaneously. The barroom burst into flames. Heat and fire blew through the open doors of the McHale Room and into the elevator lobby off the corridor, where Spalding and Lorenzano were helping Gelenius. The third floor was an inferno. Outside on Vermont Street, on the north side of the building, IFD personnel spotted fire venting out of the windows of the McHale Room. Minutes later, from Meridian Street, they saw flames engulfing the third-floor dining room—where, just moments earlier, firefighters had thought they had wrestled the blaze into submission.

Inside, in the heat and confusion that followed the burst of flames from the ceiling, Spalding, Lorenzano, and Gelenius became separated. The shoulder straps on Spalding's air tank failed, and the only thing holding his tank to his body was his face mask. He lost his helmet. His ears were burning. The sides of his face were burning.

"People don't understand how fast the conditions changed, and how hot it became," Spalding says. "It drove me down. I was just trying to escape the burning heat. I had to crawl to get someplace cooler. It was instinct. I wasn't going to survive where I was, and I wasn't going to save anybody."

Two minutes after the flashover, Abernathy and several other firefighters re-turned to the third floor wearing fresh air tanks. They found Ann Comparet—one of the young privates who had worked to rig up the Athletic Club's hose early in the firefight—collapsed on the floor of the corridor. They carried her unconscious body down a stairwell and out to safety. "The smoke was so rich with fuels, and the stairs were made of terrazzo, and it just made it slick as glass," Abernathy says. "We slid and fell so many times trying to get her down those stairs." At the base of the stairwell, they encountered a second injured and unconscious firefighter, Gregory Gates—the other private who had wrangled with the hose.

Now, only Spalding, Gelenius, and Lorenzano remained on the third floor, each in a different place. Lorenzano had no radio. Gelenius did, but, disoriented, was unable to use it. Spalding was the only man on the floor able to communicate with the outside. At 12:35 a.m., seven minutes after the ceiling flashover, he pushed the emergency button on his radio. "I wanted them to know," Spalding says, "that we were trapped."

Firefighters on the street picked up Spalding's transmission, but they couldn't make out the words. The records from that night read, simply, "inaudible message."

Twenty seconds later, Spalding hit the button again. Inaudible.

Fifteen seconds later, he hit the button again. Inaudible.

"I was having difficulty pressing the button," Spalding says. "So I took my right glove off."

The glove was the only thing protecting his favored hand from burning. He yanked it off, and then pressed the button again.

He tried to say something. Inaudible.

Spalding waited another 30 seconds before keying the radio again. This time he didn't try to speak. He hit it again eight seconds later. Then, three seconds after that.

Outside, ladder trucks were rescuing alarmed guests from the upper floors.

Spalding tried to crawl, but his tank got caught up in furniture and debris.

"And then the ceiling fell on top of me," he says.

Three more minutes passed. He pressed the button for the last time at 12:40 a.m.

Twenty-four minutes after the flashover, a rescue team made its way to the third floor and found Gelenius lying in a doorway near the elevator lobby off of the main corridor, not far from where he had been when he became separated from Lorenzano and Spalding. The firefighters pulled Gelenius, critically injured, out of the building, and an ambulance carried him to Methodist Hospital.

Seven minutes later, another team found Spalding beneath some debris in the dining room. They handed his unconscious body through a window, and a bucket truck lowered him to the ground. He was rushed to the hospital with severe burns.

**When the fire began**, interim chief Keith Smith was home, listening to the chatter over the radio. As he heard the increasingly chaotic scene unfold, he decided to head downtown.

Smith arrived after the ceiling flashover on the third floor, as firefighters stumbled over one another in the dark building. Guests were hanging out of windows on all four sides of the club. Because commanders on the street were not equipped with bullhorns, communicating with the frantic civilians proved nearly impossible.

By now, firefighters had managed to calm the inferno ignited by the flashover. But any relief that IFD personnel might have felt was tempered by horrible news from the hospital: Gelenius had succumbed to the injuries he sustained in the blaze.

And yet, reporters who approached Smith on the street all seemed to have the same question: *Did the Tyson jury get out?*

The jurors had been safely evacuated. But something else was troubling Smith.

"After so much experience in this business, you get a sense when things aren't going right," Smith says. "I felt like there was something not right about this scene, this fire, this incident. I started asking others around me: 'Do you have that feeling?'"

"We all started talking about this feeling," Smith says. "And then we discovered that there was a firefighter missing."



***Pictured: Private John Lorenzano***

At 1:38 a.m., Smith ordered a roll call. Everyone was ordered out of the building. “Lorenzano didn’t show up,” Smith says.

More than an hour had passed since Gelenius and Spalding had been pulled from the debris on the third floor. More than an hour and a half had passed since the third-floor flashover. In the darkness, a unit dispatched to the third floor to search for Lorenzano combed the smoldering wreckage in the McHale Room. There, at 2:08 a.m., their flashlights reflected off of something shiny.

It was a firefighter’s boot, a hand-me-down, with reflective tape on the back.

Lorenzano was buried beneath ceiling tiles and other debris. His nose was broken, perhaps from breathing in desperately on his air mask. He was entangled in wires, his body curled up like a baby.

Ten minutes later, firefighters discovered the body of the only civilian victim of the fire, 71-year-old Thomas Mutz, a cousin of former Indiana Lieutenant Governor John Mutz. He was found in a service stairway between the sixth and seventh floors, dead from smoke inhalation. Investigators believe he was trying to flee.

**“In the sequence of events** that night, what could go wrong, did go wrong,” says Smith. “Everybody was in a hurry and skipped a few routines. After it was all over, we had to look at ourselves, as firefighters, and ask, ‘What’s wrong with us?’”

The answers were sometimes unpleasant. John T. O’Hagan, a former New York fire commissioner, theorized that municipalities don’t learn to take fire safety seriously until they endure a firefighting tragedy. Then, cities grow up fast.

Because of the Athletic Club fire, every high-rise building in Indianapolis now has sprinklers. Each of IFD's engines is equipped with a "high-rise pack," which contains hoses, nozzles, and couplings for safely and securely hooking into a building's water source. Each firefighter is equipped with a full spectrum of firefighting gear, from a helmet and fire boots to a fireproof jacket, gloves, pants, and Nomex hood. The city pays for each piece of the uniform. Every firefighter has a flashlight. Every firefighter has a radio.

**"That fire affects a little bit of everything we do," Captain Mike Spalding says. "I'm not on the front lines like I was before."**

IFD personnel also train using the High-Rise Operating Guideline, or HOG, developed by the late Battalion Chief Clyde Pfisterer, who worked the Athletic Club fire. He also taught his approach with FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security, and even traveled to the Middle East to teach high-rise fire combat. Other departments around the country would use the Indianapolis standards to inspire their own procedures.

Mike Spalding, now an IFD battalion chief, doesn't enjoy sharing his recollections from the night of the Athletic Club fire. But he does, out of a sense of duty. Sometimes he tells his story to young recruits at Ivy Tech, in a training room named after Gelenius and Lorenzano.

"That fire affects a little bit of everything we do," Spalding says. "I'm not on the front lines like I was before. It's like I'm sending troops into battle. But I'm aware of the hazards they encounter. That has been difficult to get the young firefighters to understand. You want them to be aware of bad outcomes that can occur when they're doing their jobs. Even when you make the right decisions, you don't know for sure the outcome. It's unpredictable."

But Spalding worries that the lessons of the Athletic Club fire will someday be forgotten. "After a long period of no fatalities," Spalding says, "things kind of swing back to aesthetics again rather than fire safety." Much as the Athletic Club fire stills shapes the department's ethos, Spalding can imagine a day when it has become just another day in firefighting history. "Department lore," he calls it. In a few years, Spalding, the man with the most obvious physical scars from that day, will retire. And eventually, no one who was at the fire will remain.

**Three weeks after the Athletic Club fire,** Keith Smith was selected as IFD chief, though he hadn't even been a candidate when the position opened. The department needed one of its own in charge. It needed to heal.

John Lorenzano's widow, Barbara, sued the Indianapolis Athletic Club, as did the estate of Woody Gelenius. Spalding and Ann Comporet, the two most seriously injured firefighters, also sued. They all sued other parties, too, companies that manufactured fire-safety and communications equipment in use that night. The case involved dozens of lawyers and lingered in the courts for years before settlements concluded the ordeal. Along the way, Woody Gelenius's family dropped out of the proceedings. "We tried, T-R-I-E-D, tried, but there was just so much we ran up against," says Tammy Cougan, the oldest Gelenius daughter. "The Athletic Club had a half-page list of lawyers representing it. There was just no way to win." Gelenius's grandson Joe Cougan Jr. is now an IFD firefighter. He wears his grandfather's badge number.



***Pictured: Lorenzano's daughter, Anne Maria ("Annie) Lorenzano***

In 2004, the Athletic Club closed; it reopened a year later as condominiums. Annie Lorenzano, only a baby when John Lorenzano died, is 20 now, a sophomore at Indiana University. A lot of IFD people measure the years since the blaze by her age. "I'm like a symbol for some people," she says. "I'll go to the fallen firefighters' memorial service, and I'll see firefighters looking at me or watching me—in a good way. They've watched me grow up. To them, I kind of represent my dad."

**On a recent autumn** night, Spalding, now 60, and his wife, Cheryl, came downtown to the Indiana War Memorial to attend a wedding reception for the daughter of another battalion chief. As they left the party and descended the memorial's granite steps, Spalding looked out at the city and, across Meridian Street, saw the rectangular outline of the Athletic Club.

In many ways, the fire still burns. He feels it in his scarred right hand each year when winter sets in. He sees it in the faces of fatherless daughters each time he shows up at the annual firefighters' memorial service. He senses its weight each time he describes what happened that night.

Other firefighters avoid the site, but not Spalding. Before the reception, he had parked on Vermont Street. He was in a sentimental mood. When the night drew to an end, and the two made their way back to the car, Spalding held his wife's hand and strolled calmly past the building.

*Archive photos courtesy Nine Things / First In Last Out documentary; portraits by Tony Valainis*

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