Protecting My Family’s Future and Paying Tribute to the Past

by Rob Feeney

Intro by Dave Lafond:
I did not know Rob Feeney at all and never heard about his Station Fire experiences until he spoke at the Phoenix Society’s World Burn Conference in 2013. I was attending as a NFSA vendor.

The next time I saw Rob was during the 15th Anniversary of the Station Fire and the Station Fire Memorial service. He spoke along with a slate of local and national dignitaries including NFSA President Shane Ray.

Fast forward to July 2019. The MA Fire Sprinkler Coalition had just started meeting regularly again after about a year of inactivity. Rob had contacted me out of the blue inquiring how he can get involved in local / state issues surrounding fire sprinklers. I told Rob about the Coalition meetings and legislation that we have supported and invited him to the next meeting. It was at this meeting that Rob told me that Common Voices was going to get his new home retrofitted with fire sprinklers.

After a quick call with Vickie Pritchett, we were on our way to get Rob's home designed, materials list generated, labor lined up and materials delivered, including a tank and pump system. Well that’s what I thought anyway… John Wooden Quote: “Good things take time, as they should. We shouldn’t expect good things to happen overnight.” HA! That’s an understatement. We started the “Feeney Project” in August 2019 and finished it in October 2020. And 2020… what a 2020 it’s been!

We would like to acknowledge the following. Without their assistance, the “Feeney Project” would not have happened, and Rob and his family would not have the protection they need and deserve.

Common Voices.
National Fire Sprinkler Association
Sprinkler Fitters Local 550
Boston Industry Promotion
Viking
JB Engineering
Fire Sprinkler Specialists
Jim Watson, from EM Duggan, donated his time to design the system and develop the materials list.
General Air, who donated and delivered the tank and pump system.
Core and Main
L-550 Member, United Automatic Fire Sprinkler Company

On Thursday night, February 20, 2003, I attended the “80’s Hair Band” Great White concert in West Warwick, Rhode Island at a little roadhouse nightclub called The Station. I had seen friends’ cover and tribute bands play this venue, so I had a little idea of the layout. I was with my fiancé and three other friends. Three of us went across the street to grab some dinner while the other two went in The Station to hear the opening bands. Never in my life would I have thought that about 90 minutes or so after we met up with the rest of our group in The Station, I would be in the back of an ambulance in route to Rhode Island Hospital with severe burns on my head, face, hands and shoulder, along with internal injuries, only to wake up from an induced coma 12 days later to find out that my fiancé, Donna, had been buried that morning. Her best friend, Mary, had been buried by her family the same week. A few months later, I was able to attend the service of a third member of our group, Pam, as she became known as the 100th victim of The Station Nightclub Fire.

I kept in close contact with the other surviving friend in my group, Kathy, after she was discharged from Mass General Hospital in Boston several weeks after I was discharged. Kathy introduced me to an organization called The Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, which she was introduced to by a long-time burn survivor from her hometown, Frank McGonagle. The Phoenix Society holds an annual World Burn Conference, each time in a different city, where hundreds of burn survivors, their families, caretakers and first responders get together for several days of educating, being educated, sharing stories and making life-long friendships with someone who can relate on living life with a burn injury.
There are keynote speakers, general and breakout group sessions, specific topic seminars and open mic sessions each day. The World Burn Conference (WBC) was and is the one place a burn survivor and loved ones can be amongst our own, free of judgment, and be able to listen, share and learn about our experiences as a manner of mental and emotional therapy that is unequaled anywhere else. It is also a place where outlets are found that can empower a burn survivor to use their experience in a way that can hopefully bring awareness to burn injuries and the best treatment and prevention practices, and also prevent others from experiencing the same traumatic event that led to their burn injury. After attending my first World Burn Conference in Cleveland, Ohio in August of 2003, I promised myself I would do everything in my power to attend every year.

It took several years for me to realize the role the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors played in my recovery. I was dealing with the physical recovery and pain management but was not prepared for the survivor’s guilt and PTSD to take over my life. The Phoenix Society was prepared. They saw the signs. They got me help. In the course of them helping me, I was telling (sharing) my story...a lot! I was telling my story to help other burn survivors, to help me and ultimately, to prevent an incident like The Station Nightclub Fire from happening again. Unbeknownst to me, I was becoming an advocate. I was advocating for an incident like The Station Nightclub Fire to never happen again. I was advocating for buildings such as The Station to be equipped with automatic fire sprinkler systems. At one World Burn Congress, I attended a session about fire sprinklers by a group called Fire Team USA. This session was facilitated by then Pleasant View, Tennessee Fire Chief, Shane Ray and Common Voices’ Vickie Pritchett. During the seminar, Chief Ray spoke of how different of an outcome there would have been in The Station fire had there been an automatic fire sprinkler system and how it was proven through tests that there would have been ZERO deaths and little to no burn injuries. I was asked to speak at the end as a survivor of The Station fire. I began speaking about The Station fire even more...newspapers and magazines, local cable access TV channels, (former) Discovery History Channel, and future World Burn Congresses, among others. Amy Acton of the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors had me speaking with the local media at each WBC. Amy had me train in public speaking with “Mr. Media” Brad Phillips...a few times. When the time came for either the Phoenix Society or Common Voices to be in need of a burn survivor who is also an advocate of fire sprinkler systems, my name quickly went to the top of the list.

The first big call came from Vickie Pritchett. Vickie told me that Common Voices was trying to help the Chattanooga, Tennessee Fire Department and some city officials pass a sprinkler ordinance for nightclubs. There was one more city council meeting left for a final vote. Vickie asked me to testify on the importance of nightclubs having sprinklers. After my testimony, and after listening to those who opposed sprinklers, I felt inside that advocacy was something not only I wanted to do but needed to do. I was met in the hallway by a city council member after finding out the final vote. He thanked me for coming down to Chattanooga and convincing him to be the deciding vote in favor of the sprinkler ordinance. After, I was called to the Mayor’s office. He also thanked me. Surviving The Station fire had begun feeling like a good thing.

I was now not only an advocate for the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, but also for Common Voices. I was invited to attend and speak at a variety of conferences hosted by NFSA, NFPA and Vision 20/20, and be a keynote speaker at many Fire Service/Safety Conferences across the country. In 2013, I was nominated to win the Phoenix Society’s Advocate of the Year award. One of the invites that I enjoyed the most is being asked by Vickie to go to Washington, D.C. and advocate for a change in legislation making it easier for small businesses to retrofit an automatic fire sprinkler system. After several years of trying, I was given the honor of announcing the passing of the bill in February of 2018.

After several years of speaking to audiences large and small, made mostly of Fire Chiefs, Fire Marshals and firefighters in several cities across the country, I made the decision to start learning the job of those I’m preaching to. I became a call firefighter at the Onset, Massachusetts Fire Department in 2015. Since then, I’ve progressed through the department to become the Assistant Fire Prevention Officer along with the Communication Supervisor. Several months ago, I was promoted to Lieutenant. Having some sense of what my prime audience has dealt with regarding fire prevention, I feel I am able to be a better advocate and not only speak for burn survivors and people who have lost loved ones to fire, but also be a voice for members of the fire service who feel fire sprinklers would solve a lot of the problems with LODDs, injuries and civilian fatalities in structure fires. Being in the fire service, I found advocacy opportunities closer to home. I began getting involved with the Massachusetts Fire Sprinkler Coalition after speaking with the NFSA’s Dave LaFond. Through the Coalition, I was finally given the opportunity to advocate locally for change in legislature at the Massachusetts State House. In October of 2019, I testified with Burn Survivors of New England President Diana Tenney and Mass General Hospital Burn Surgeon, Dr. Colleen Ryan, in a push for HB 2027, authorizing the option for municipalities to require automatic sprinkler protection systems in certain one- and two-family dwellings. For close to a year before this testimony, my wife and I were in the market to become homeowners and stop being renters. While we knew we probably couldn’t afford to buy land and build a new house, we both agreed that we were getting the house we found retrofitted with an automatic fire sprinkler system. Being in fire prevention, I knew many of the houses that were being built or sold in my fire district. Our realtor showed us one house that I had done a final inspection on nearly two years before, when it was built. Turned out, the house was never sold and never lived in. After viewing it a coupon of times, we found our house. Upon hearing we were buying a house, Vickie called me and said that as a housewarming gift for my advocacy, Common Voices was going to make sure we had the best protection possible. I was getting my “new house” retrofitted with a fire sprinkler system.

While at a Coalition meeting in August of 2019, I informed Dave LaFond of Common Voices’ plan to get my home sprinkled with a 13D Automatic Residential Fire Sprinkler System. Dave worked with Vickie in getting the funds secured along with materials and labor. It was looking like the project was going to be happening in
the fall of 2019. NFSA member General Air Products dropped off an all-in-one tank and pump system that was stored in my garage. It stayed in my garage. It was huge. It was too big to go through the basement door and down the stairs and too big to fit down the bulkhead stairs and into that basement door. That “monster” sat in my garage for the next few months. General Air custom created a dual tank system (225 gallons each) with a pump and all the pipes and fittings that were delivered in March of 2020. I was within a month of the work being done. Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck. We found out that the sprinkler fitters were shut down and not working. I had an entire automatic fire sprinkler system sprawled out across part of my basement and no date in sight of when a contractor would put this all together and my family would finally be protected.

Fast forward to end of June. United Automatic Fire Sprinkler Company took on the job and began running the pipes and adding sprinkler heads throughout the main floor of my house. The guys did a great job. They made it look easy. Day Two came in mid-July, when they were able to get most of the basement done and the pump attached to the tanks. They were able to get back to my house later in August to finish up the remaining pipes and heads. In October, local electrician, Jack Ikkela wired the pump and a water flow bell. On October 13, 2020, I finally had the comfort of knowing my family had the ultimate protection from fire while they’re asleep and when I’m at work, along with our family cat and our belongings when we aren’t home. The locations of the sprinkler heads make egress from any part of the house extremely manageable should a sprinkler head be activated by fire. The self-contained tank and pump system provides 450 gallons of water delivered at enough psi to not only buy us time to evacuate the house, but may very well come close to putting a fire out, if not completely extinguishing it. It has been a few months since the project officially got off the ground. I don’t even notice the sprinkler heads anymore. They’re just part of the house and nothing close to an eyesore that some people fear sprinklers would be in a home. They are a welcome addition.*