



1590

165 died at Beverly Hills Supper Club; the pain lingers
 By Lori Kurtzman and Scott Wartman
 USA TODAY

SOUTHGATE, Ky. — The fire raged and the bodies piled atop the hill. Dottie Eberle sat on a firetruck staring, not believing what she was seeing.

Only hours before, she'd been working as a hostess at the swank Beverly Hills Supper Club in Southgate, Ky., directing guests to their private parties or to the Cabaret Room, where entertainer John Davidson was headlining a 9 p.m. show. She'd just seated a party of 12 when someone mentioned something about a fire in the club's Zebra Room.

It was May 28, 1977.

Eberle was 43, a mother of five. For seven years she'd worked at the Beverly Hills, a glamorous nightspot with crystal chandeliers and spiral staircases, a place unlike anything else in Northern Kentucky. Even on the weekdays, Eberle said, women would enter in full-length gowns and diamonds, escorted by men in tuxedos.

"It was gorgeous," Eberle said, calling it a thrill "just to drive up the driveway and pass the sign that said 'The Beverly Hills Supper Club.'" And now she was watching it all burn down.

On Monday, survivors, former employees and relatives of many of those who died that night will mark the 30th anniversary of the fire with a service at the bottom of the hill that once led to the club. Dave Brock, an 18-year-old busboy at the time and now a grandfather, is organizing the service. He said he believes it will bring back a lot of memories, both good and bad.

The fire began behind a wall and quickly spread throughout the club, feeding on flammable furniture, tapestries and decorative paneling. It rolled rapidly through the building's main corridor. As many as 3,000 people were thought to be in the building, and they bottlenecked trying to flee through what fire officials later determined were an inadequate number of exits. Many became trapped in the Cabaret Room. By morning, workers had pulled 134 bodies from that one site.

The Beverly Hills blaze would become one of the deadliest nightclub fires in U.S. history, the worst being the 1942 fire in Boston's Cocomat Grove nightclub that killed 492. All told, 165 people died in the Kentucky fire, among them husbands and wives who left behind orphans.

"I just think mentally I was trying to block it out, but I couldn't," Eberle, now 73 and living on the east side of Cincinnati, recalled this week. "I just sat there on that firetruck thinking this did not happen to us. But it did happen."

Much has changed in the three decades since the Beverly Hills fire, and many in this country have been affected.

Fire officials said faulty aluminum wiring was to blame for the blaze, which resulted in a shift to copper alternatives. A number of other factors also might have contributed to the loss of life. Chief among them, said Robert Duval, a senior fire investigator with the National Fire Protection Association, were overcrowding, delayed notification while employees tried to put out the fire and a lack of sprinklers in the 65,000-square-foot building.

The incident at the Beverly Hills caused the NFPA to change its code, which is in use in all 50 states, Duval said. Afterward, the code required new and existing nightclublike facilities that hold more than 300 people to have fire alarms that included voice messages giving evacuation instructions. It also called for all new nightclubs of that size to be outfitted with sprinklers — a requirement that was extended to all new nightclubs and any existing ones that hold more than 100 people after a 2003 fire at a Rhode Island nightclub killed 100 people.

"In the fire code business, unfortunately a lot of changes are reactive," Duval said.

The fire's impact also went beyond code changes. It helped add to the growing body of research into post-traumatic-stress disorder through subsequent psychological studies of survivors. It spawned one of the country's first class-action lawsuits involving disasters, netting nearly \$50 million for clients and their lawyers.

In the months after the fire, hospitals in 33 states and seven countries requested copies of the disaster plan St. Luke Hospital used during the crisis, said the hospital's former CEO, John Hoyle.

By coincidence, Hoyle was at the Beverly Hills that night. He called his hospital from a firetruck radio to activate the plan, which has been updated throughout the years.

Only a thick grove of honeysuckle and a cracked driveway remain where the "Showcase of the Nation" once shined on a 78-acre hilltop. Remnants of the nightclub occasionally emerge from the ground. A rotted dress shoe with what appears to be a single mark rests on a pile of debris. Broken cups and plates from the club litter the meadow floor.

"This stuff keeps washing up" after it rains, said Wayne Dammert, who was a waiter and banquet captain during the fire. Dammert sometimes visits the site to care for a 25-foot memorial cross he's built there. He's salvaged menus, candelabras and a rusted table from the wreckage.

Nothing has ever taken the club's place. Vehement public opposition nixed one development company's plan in 1996 to build \$90 million worth of office and retail space at the site. It now belongs to a non-profit company, Life

Enriching Communities, which bought the property for \$3.65 million in 2001 and planned to build a retirement community there.

Even so, Southgate City Council has been reluctant to change the zoning to allow that, and Life Enriching Communities has put its plans on hold, said Connie Schmitt, a company spokesperson.

"I don't think anything needs to be built there," said Dana Stallings, who lost her mother, aunt and two pregnant sisters in the fire. "If they are not going to build a memorial, leave it alone."

Newspaper Home Delivery - Subscribe Today

[Home](#) • [News](#) • [Travel](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

About USATODAY.com: [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Jobs with Us](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

[Privacy Policy/Your California Privacy Right](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Developer](#) | [Media Lounge](#) | [Reprints and Permissions](#)

News Your Way: [Mobile News](#) | [Email News](#) | [Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Podcasts](#) | [Widgets](#)

Partners: [USA WEEKEND](#) | [Sports Weekly](#) | [Education](#) | [Space.com](#) | [Travel Tips](#)

Copyright 2011 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.