

AFTER THE SMOKE CLEARS AND THE FIRE TRUCKS LEAVE

The Aftermath of a School Fire

BY SALLY DILLON

"Mom, our school is on fire!" said a tearful voice on the telephone. "Cocky Junior is in there [a beloved cockatiel who liked to sit on shoulders, chew pencils, and squawk during prayer], and Iggy [an iguana], and all our other pets. You know that song we used to sing? 'We go up, we go down, we don't care if the school burns down . . .' Well, I don't think I'll ever sing it again. It isn't funny anymore."

As the awful truth sank in, the term *arson* left both teachers and students of the Shenandoah Valley Academy Elementary School and the Berry Patch Nursery School in New Market, Virginia, feeling personally violated. All of the elementary children had lost classroom pets and struggled to cope with the fact that somebody had killed them on purpose.

Teachers grieved for the classrooms into which they had poured hours of their time and energy to develop cozy nooks for learning. Rusty Litten lost a whole career's worth of rocks, biology specimens, and museum-quality fossils and artifacts.

The brand-new kitchen had just been installed with the help of students, teachers, and church members in the community.

How does a school go about recovering from such a tragedy?

About a year before our fire, another small Virginia school

Picture
Removed

Although the frame burned, the picture of Jesus in the school hallway was miraculously untouched.

had also burned. It was hard not to compare their recovery with ours.

Grief Recovery

The first task, once the flames were out and damage was assessed, was to grieve. Following their fire, the public school had offered group sessions for their students. Our school burned on Friday morning. Recovery started the next day in church. Our pastor used the sermon time to talk about the fire and our losses and to offer comfort.

The firemen discovered that although the desks in the fifth- and sixth-grade

rooms were charred and melted, every Bible in these classrooms was still intact. The picture of Jesus in the hall was still there, though the frame had burned. The pastor preached his sermon using one of the sixth graders' Bibles.

Tears flowed freely during the service, but as one seventh grader put it, "I think Jesus saved our Bibles and our picture of Him so we would know that even in an awful thing like our fire, He is still with us." Sabbath afternoon was spent at the burned-out site, having a prayer service for the recovery of each grieving member of the community and asking God for guidance in making future plans.

Salvage Operations

The salvage operation began as soon as the school was cool

Picture
Removed

*Marsha Cato,
one of the vol-
unteers who
helped wash
down smoke-
damaged
chairs and
desks.*

Fire departments from a number of nearby communities sent equipment to fight the SVAE fire, which took about three hours to extinguish.

enough to enter. Contents of the building were carried out and sorted. Items too damaged to salvage were disposed of. Others were wiped off to remove the soot, and placed in an ozone chamber set up on the premises. This removed the smoky smell from the books and other items. “Of course,” as one student pointed out, “now all our stuff smells like ozone, which isn’t so great, either!”

Though the sorting and ozone treatment had to be done by professionals, the wiping-down process presented an opportunity for volunteers to help. Students from the elementary school, as well as Shenandoah Valley Academy staff and students and community members, pitched in to help clean up as much as they could. This gave everyone a sense of accomplishing something instead of standing by feeling helpless.

Temporary Reinstatement of Routine

Getting staff and students back to a normal routine as soon as possible was crucial. When the public school burned, their choices were limited. They gave their students two weeks off from school and assessed their options. Pupils were then divided among the adjacent school districts, depending on where they lived, and finished the school year in other schools.

The New Market SDA school board met the Sunday after the fire to review their options. By Monday morning, the Berry Patch Nursery School had been

Pictures
Removed

Burned items from the fire.

moved to the fellowship hall of the New Market church. (They had met in a portable classroom, which was completely undamaged by the fire.) As a result, they were able to resume classes the following day.

The elementary students took a week off for an early spring break while the administrators and board sought for space to accommodate them. Originally, the board wanted to keep all the elementary students together. Unfortunately, this was not possible. The classes had to be scattered about in different locations on the academy campus—from the administration building to the girls’ dormitory chapel.

Many replacement items, including books and desks, were donated by other schools across the country that had heard of our tragedy. Nature enthusiasts and collectors, many of whom heard about the tragedy via Adventists On-line, the church’s computer forum, sent specimens to help replace Rusty’s lost collections. Replacement pets were offered, too. Even though some children still felt badly about the lost pets and didn’t want new ones, it was healing to have new birds and animals to love.

The elementary administrators moved their offices to the undamaged portable classroom that had previously housed the nursery school. To help Principal Andrea Herrington manage the spread-out school, they gave her a cellular phone.

Teachers now isolated from the rest of the school were given a teacher's assistant to help with classroom tasks and function as "go-fers." Grades five through eight shared the same building, so the team-teaching system previously in use could continue.

Picture Removed

Plans for the Future

The public school's implementation of planning and building was fast and efficient. They were not happy with their immediate circumstances and had a new school built within a year. Our progress has been slower. After four months, all the committees, boards, and constituencies had considered all the op-

As the awful truth sank in, the term arson left both teachers and students of the Shenandoah Valley Academy Elementary School and Berry Patch Nursery School in New Market, Virginia, feeling personally violated.

tions and decided to rebuild on the existing site, and a building committee had been formed.

It is important when participating in this process to envision the school you will need instead of the one you had. The SDA elementary school in New Market is highly regarded in the surrounding communities. Many non-Adventist families send their children to SVAE as a preferred alternative to the local public schools. The school has experienced rapid growth and will probably continue to do so. The school board had been poised to start an expansion program when the fire occurred, so plans are being formulated for a larger building to accommodate future needs.

Cost is always a serious consideration. But you do not want to start worrying about how to raise the money after the fire has done its damage. The time to think about the possibility of damage or destruction to property is before it happens, not after. Planning should begin with adequate insurance. Actual value

Fire-Fighting Fundamentals

Few disasters can be as devastating as a fire. To minimize the chance that your school will suffer this kind of catastrophe, you must address the risks systematically, conscientiously, and proactively.

In a brief sidebar, it is impossible to provide comprehensive guidelines for fire prevention and indeed, not all fires are preventable. However, the principles listed below will help minimize the likelihood that a fire will occur at your school and lessen the extent of damage if one should take place.

1. *Let there be light.* Criminals and arsonists can conceal themselves in dark areas, so install bright lights everywhere they might try to enter—doors, windows, skylights, etc., using motion-activated and/or timing mechanisms to automatically turn lights on and off. Strategically position shrubs and trees and prune them regularly so they do not provide hiding places or access to the windows, vents, or roof.

2. *Do it right, or don't do it at all.* It may not be true economy to use volunteer labor to install electrical work if a fire is later caused by faulty wiring. Check the professional qualifications of anyone working on the school's electrical systems. In older schools, antiquated wiring or inadequate circuits may create a fire hazard. Have the wiring inspected periodically by a qualified electrician. If you add on to your building, be sure to choose materials with a high fire-retardancy rating.

3. *There is strength in numbers.* Establish partnerships with your local fire officials, police, and neighbors. Encourage police to use your parking lot as a place to complete their paperwork. This can help to deter criminals and provide an early detection system for fire. Install an alarm system connected to the fire and police departments and/or moni-

tored by an alarm service provider. Establish and/or participate in an active neighborhood watch program

4. *Cleanliness is next to godliness.* Check around the school for combustible materials and fire hazards. Old rags and cardboard boxes should not be stored in the furnace room. Boxes in a hallway can provide a bridge for fire to spread from one location to another. Use special care in cleaning kitchens, science labs, and heating rooms, since these locations often contain open flames.

5. *A stitch in time saves nine.* The sooner a fire is detected and dealt with, the better the chances of minimizing losses. Check the batteries at least annually in battery-operated smoke detectors. Have fire extinguishers and hose systems inspected and serviced regularly, and install the right type of fire extinguisher in appropriate locations. If possible, install a sprinkler system, which will save lives and property.

6. *Be prepared.* Develop, implement, practice, and communicate a fire response plan. Have a back-up plan to minimize "down time." Review insurance and other risk financing programs to be sure that you have adequate coverage and limits. Contact Adventist Risk Management to help you identify and analyze potential risks, recommend effective risk control, and evaluate alternative approaches to insuring the property and its contents.

7. *Pray and trust in the Lord.* He has promised to bless our efforts. He keeps His promises. Even out of adversity, He can and will bring blessing.—James J. Jacobs.

James J. Jacobs is Director, Risk Control Services, Adventist Risk Management, in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Pictures
Removed

Kindergarten students moved to the Cradle Roll 1 room at the church.

Caring people offered pets to replace the ones lost in the fire.

Picture
Removed

Children at the Berry Patch Nursery School moved to a portable classroom immediately after the fire.

First and second graders show off their new classroom in the academy's industrial-arts building.

versus replacement costs can be quite different. Our insurance provides for replacement of the original building and any improvements needed to meet existing codes. However, building what we expect to need in the immediate future will cost far more than merely replacing the old facility, which was already bulging at the seams.

Conclusion

What does it take to recover from

*The first task, once
the flames were out
and damage was
assessed, was to
grieve.*

something as devastating as a school fire? It takes vision, decisiveness, time, money, commitment, and a lot of hard work by dedicated people. But as we have found in New Market, given a problem, the church and community will rise to the occasion and develop creative solutions. When we were in need, we found that God had already provided all the necessary resources. And while things have gone more slowly than some would have hoped, we're moving to make our elementary school even better than before.

Pictures
Removed

The seventh and eighth graders work on their new computers at their classroom in the church.

The salvage operation began as soon as the school was cool enough to enter.

Pictures
Removed

As we go to press . . .

Shenandoah Valley Adventist Elementary School recently hired an insurance reconstruction company to rebuild the school (as it was, plus state-required upgrades). They are also actively raising funds to expand the rebuilt school as soon as possible. Classes are still meeting in borrowed spaces at the church and academy, but teachers and students have been promised that they can move back into their own school by Christmas.

Though decreased enrollment was a concern, by the end of the summer vacation, 95 students had registered for the fall semester. This does not include the children in the Berry Patch Nursery School. The school family is planning a terrific homecoming celebration when they move back into their own space. As one student put it, "That [getting our

Third- and fourth-grade students in their temporary classroom at the academy girls' dormitory chapel.

school back] will be the best Christmas present ever." ✍

Sally Dillon is President and Senior Healthcare Consultant of BSJ Associates, Inc., in Timberville, Virginia, and is responsible for consulting, speaking, and writing on Staff Development, Management, and Critical Care topics. Her last article, which dealt with helping the student with a chronically ill parent, appeared in the October/November 1995 issue of the JOURNAL.

Teacher Marty Williams touches base by phone with her spread-out colleagues.