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NORTHEAST PHILADELPHIA'S PREMIER COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

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IN THE TIMES

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JENNY SWIGODA /
TIMES PHOTO

Richard Iannacone's family stands over the plaques dedicated to the fallen firefighters.

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*Thirty-three
years later,
plaques
remember
the ...*

Barson's blaze

By Tom Waring
Times Staff Writer

Firefighter Barney Farrell well recalls the afternoon of Sunday, May 16, 1976.

Farrell, now retired, was working at Engine 62 back then. On that spring day, the call came out that Barson's Overbrook Restaurant and Delicatessen was on fire.

The engine raced to the scene, at 8354-56 Bustleton Ave., in the Bell's Corner Shopping Center.

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BARSON'S

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Seventy customers and employees were evacuated.

"We were up on the roof, and somebody said four firemen were missing," Farrell recalled. "It was sad. We were all crying."

Those four missing firemen were fighting the blaze when the floor suddenly collapsed, sending them to the fiery basement. Firefighters Richard Iannacone, Bernard McSloy, David Stewart and Aloysius Welsh all died of their injuries.

Last week, 33 years after the tragedy, those firefighters were honored with memorial plaques placed on the sidewalk on the southwest corner of Bustleton Avenue and Bergen Street.

"Let this be a part of the healing," said Fire Commissioner Lloyd Ayers, who had been a fireman for two years when the tragedy occurred.

The May 20 ceremony was part of the ongoing Local 22 International Association of Fire Fighters Memorial Plaque Program.

The union teams with attorney Jimmy Binns to honor the 286 firefighters who have died in the line of duty since 1871. To date, 62 plaques have been dedicated.

The plaques were sponsored by Dan McCaffery, who was the runner-up in last

week's Democratic primary for district attorney. McCaffery, 11 at the time of the fire, lived in nearby Rhawnhurst and remembers riding his bicycle to the scene.

State Rep. John Sabatina Jr. presented Pennsylvania House of Representatives citations to the families of the victims.

Binns and Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 5 organize a similar plaque program for fallen police officers.

Brian McBride, the outgoing president of Local 22, was on the job for a year back in May 1976.

Less than a year earlier, eight firefighters were killed when a tank burst into flames while they were battling a blaze at the Gulf refinery in South Philadelphia.



JENNY SWIGODA / TIMES PHOTOS

Lt. Frank Squillace stands at attention during the plaque unveiling.

The Barson's tragedy added to the somber mood in the department.

"It was numbing," McBride recalled of those days.

May 16, 1976, started as a routine day. The city was celebrating its bicentennial, and Flyers fans were hoping that the team could recover from three games down to the Montreal Canadiens to win their third consecutive Stanley Cup.

But the deadly, four-alarm blaze grabbed everyone's attention.

Inside the eatery, customers complained that it was warm. The electric cash register and jukebox stopped working. Soon, there was a haze of smoke.

The fire, which started at 12:06 p.m., required the assistance of firefighters

from a number of local stations.

About 40 minutes later, as firefighters pulled seat cushions from the booths and paneling from the walls to find where the smoldering fire was, the floor collapsed.

Later, it was determined that faulty wiring started the fire in the basement and that it spread along a shelving unit loaded with paper products. The fire burned away at the wooden beams that were supporting the floor until it collapsed. The roof and air conditioning units eventually collapsed into the basement.

Mayor Frank Rizzo and his brother, Fire Commissioner Joe Rizzo, arrived on the scene. The fire was placed under control at 2:22 p.m.

Four days later, the firefighters were laid to rest.

Cardinal John Krol presided over a funeral Mass for Iannacone, Stewart and Welsh at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul. More than 2,000 firefighters from all over the country were in attendance. McSloy's funeral Mass was held at St. Katherine of Siena.

Today, the 99-cent Expo sits at Barson's location in the shopping center.

Family members of the fallen firefighters attended last week's dedication and later visited Ladder 28 and Engine 71, at 1900 Cottman Ave., for refreshments.

That's where McSloy and Welsh worked.

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JENNY SWIGODA / TIMES PHOTOS

Maribeth Pfluger, daughter of fallen firefighter David Stewart, speaks in gratitude on behalf of her family. At right, Fire Commissioner Lloyd Ayers says of the memorial plaques: “Let this be a part of the healing.”

BARSON'S

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McSloy, 32, was survived by his wife and two daughters.

Welsh, 49, was weeks away from celebrating his 25th wedding anniversary and his 25th year in the Fire Department. He was survived by his wife, Rose, and three children. Rose passed away in March.

Iannacone, 26, of Parkwood, was survived by his wife, Anna, and daughter Tracey. Just days before the fire, Anna found out she was pregnant. She eventually gave birth to a second daughter, Robin.

“Being pregnant was good because it gave me hope,” she said. “Our family stayed close.”

Stewart, 52, of Morrell Park, was detailed to Ladder 28 on the day of the

fire and was planning to retire. He was survived by his wife, five children and two grandchildren.

“His loss is with us on a daily basis,” said his daughter, Maribeth Pfluger.

Pfluger, in her early 20s at the time, remembers that the aftermath of her father’s death was hard on the family. They lived one day at a time, but have always missed him at births, weddings and parties. Today, he has 16 grandchild-

dren.

The families appreciated the plaques placed in their loved ones’ memory.

“It’s nice because it’s forever,” Pfluger said.

Added Anna Iannacone: “It’s nice to know that the department and the city don’t forget.” ●●

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