



SOUTHWEST

DISTRICT 68



# Southwest Inn Fire

May 31, 2013

On May 31, 2013, the Houston Fire Department suffered its worst tragedy in its 118 year paid existence. Four firefighters were lost in the line of duty when the roof of the Bhojan Restaurant inside the Southwest Inn collapsed on them just minutes after their arrival. District Chief Curtis Seamans, a 40-year veteran of the department and 68 “A” Shift, was Incident Commander of the fire. Below he shares in his words the courage and sacrifice, as seen through his eyes that fateful day:

May 31, 2013: A mild spring Friday with scattered, wispy clouds accenting a beautiful blue sky, is a date that will live in infamy for the Houston Fire Department.

At about ten minutes before noon, a fire was reported at the Southwest Inn, 5355 Southwest Freeway. Immediately firefighters hurriedly jumped on the trucks, donning gear, checking radio channels, and preparing for what lay just ahead. Within seconds they were rolling, sirens and air horns screaming. Each firefighter cast a short glance in the general direction of the fire, looking for tell-tale signs of the seriousness of the situation. They were not to be disappointed, for a fairly large column of smoke had formed in the sky. The words, “We got one!” rang out loudly as they wound their way precariously through lunch time traffic in the area.

Engine 51 was first on location. Captain Matt Renaud did a great job of sizing up the incident and relaying information to other responders. He reported a restaurant and large, attached hotel

with heavy smoke showing and people exiting the building, a situation calling for an interior search for victims and an offensive fire attack using water from Engine 51’s on board tank. An offensive fire attack allows firefighters to focus on victim rescue by placing themselves inside a burning structure immediately upon arrival, as opposed to the defensive option which allows firefighters to remain outside.

Knowing the tank on Engine 51 would not provide enough water to complete the operation, Captain Renaud ordered Engine 68, the second-arriving engine, to connect two four inch hoses to a nearby hydrant in order to supplement the supply of water, a task that would require several minutes to complete.

Captain Renaud had neither doubt nor fear regarding which actions to take and his crew bravely set about their task, awaiting the arrival of other members of Southwest Houston’s well-oiled firefighting machine. I arrived and established Southwest Freeway Command,

making the necessary assignments relative to this type of fire: rapid intervention team, water supply, vertical ventilation, etc.

Engine 51's crew very courageously made their way into the interior of the building, encountering moderate to heavy smoke and heat conditions, and began searching among the many tables, chairs, and other room contents for trapped occupants. They also checked above the interior ceiling for hidden fire. Finding none, the crew advanced on the fire, flooding it with the large nozzle, and the smoke began to "go white", a sure sign to firefighters that they are making significant headway.

They quickly ran low on water since they were not yet hooked up to the hydrant and they were ordered out of the structure. When the water was finally secured to the hydrant, Captain Renaud requested to re-enter the building and finish the job. As incident commander I gave the go-ahead and ordered Engines 68 and 82 to assist with the search process and develop a large enough contingency plan to make any needed rescues. Captain Bill Dowling and the crew of Engine 68 entered the building and began assisting Engine 51 with the search for victims. Just before Engine 82's crew reached the entrance, they were met by a firefighter asking them to help pull more hose into the interior for use by Engine 51's crew.

Suddenly, the ground shook and in an instant HFD was changed forever.

A massive, catastrophic ceiling and roof collapse occurred just fourteen minutes into the operation. Tons of wood, tar and gravel, and concrete slate roofing came down unexpectedly with earthquake force, trapping five firefighters in a desperate situation. Immediately, a "mayday" went out and the focus turned to helping them escape a tragic fate. Rescue 10, Engine 60, Engine 82, Heavy Rescue 11, Rescue 42, Engine 48, Ladder 51, and many others displayed unbelievable courage and determination as they risked their lives in the monumental rescue effort.

The fire grew exponentially and since it could now draw enough oxygen to create a raging inferno, eventually exceeded five alarms. The wind repeatedly pushed smoke and heat into the work area. Firefighters worked until they dropped, exposed to dangerous levels of carbon monoxide and other toxic products of combustion. Sick to their stomachs from smoke

inhalation, complete exhaustion, unrelenting anguish, and taking extreme risks, they worked on and on, refusing to give up.

Captain Dowling of Engine 68 was the first to be located and rescued. Rescue 10 Firefighter Kevin Mathison had, at great personal risk, crawled on his stomach into the very confined space where the captain was trapped and equipped him with breathing equipment that allowed him to stay alive until rescuers could reach him. A secondary collapse during the rescue effort severely injured Rescue 42 Engineer Operator Tony Livesay, Rescue 42 Firefighter Robert Yarbrough, and Rescue 11 Firefighter Foster Santos. Unfortunately many others would suffer injury and exhaustion before the day was done.

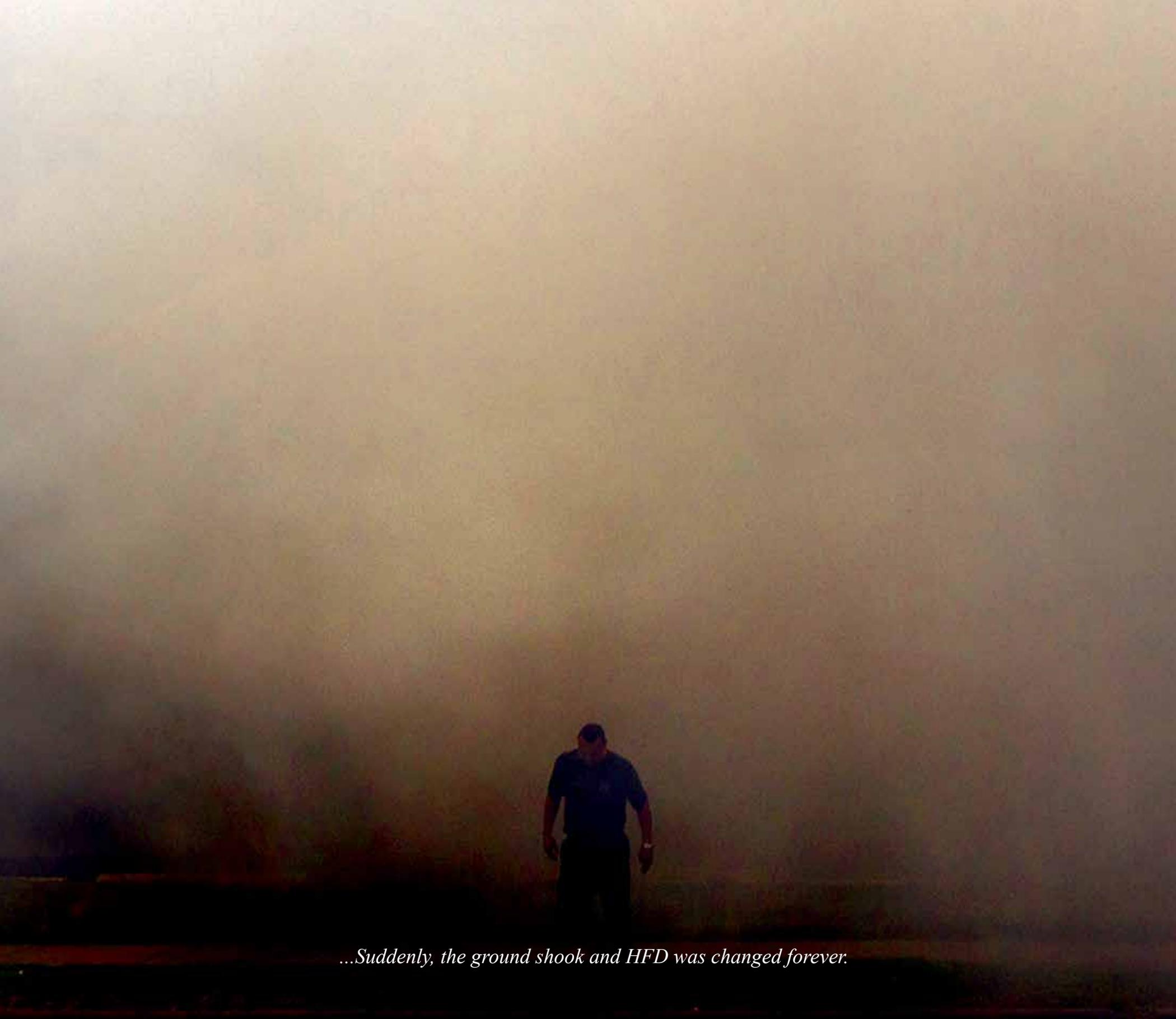
It was the worst day in HFD's long history, but also its finest hour. What was witnessed that fateful day will never be forgotten. The unbelievable courage, commitment, and compassion displayed by every single firefighter brother and sister was truly indescribable. Sadly it would not be enough.

Four beautiful, wonderful lives were lost. Senior Captain Matthew Renaud, Engineer Operator Robert Bebee, Firefighter Robert Garner and Firefighter Anne Sullivan paid the ultimate price in service to their fellow man. They gave their lives in pursuit of a principle that can only be described as a "calling".

Captain Bill Dowling suffered life-changing injuries and the story of his survival against what seemed to be insurmountable odds has earned him the nickname "Iron Bill Dowling". Engineer Operator Tony Livesay and Firefighter Robert Yarbrough continue their valiant efforts to overcome their own medical challenges as a result of injuries sustained that fateful day.

May 31, 2013. This was the day that changed so many lives. This was the day that proved the "calling" and commitment of so many brave individuals. This was HFD's most tragic day and it must never be forgotten. All of us, whether current or future HFD members, civilians, or family members of these fallen heroes, must think of them and what they did for us often, and be sure to never forget our fallen comrades.



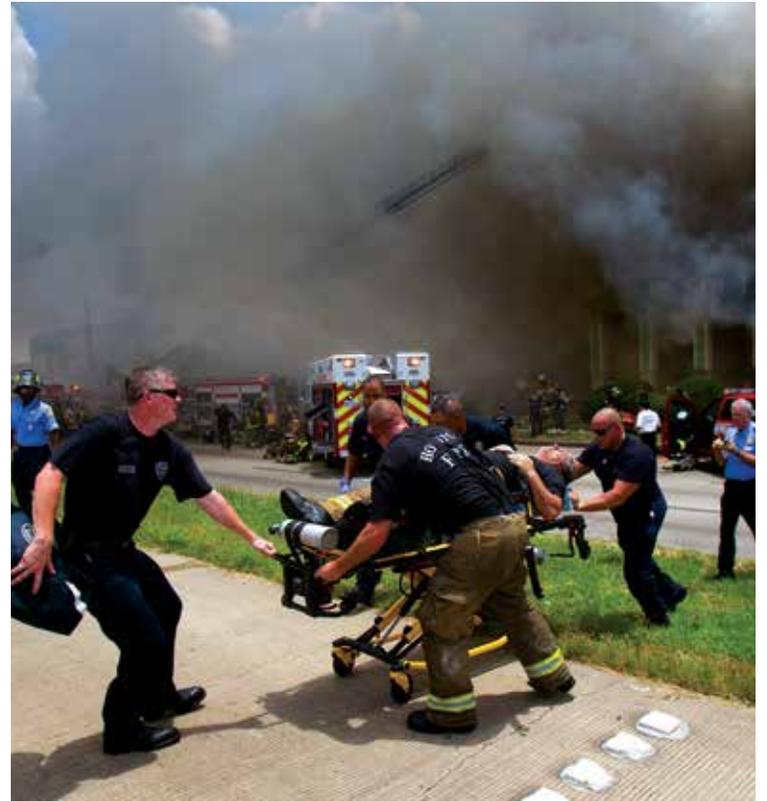


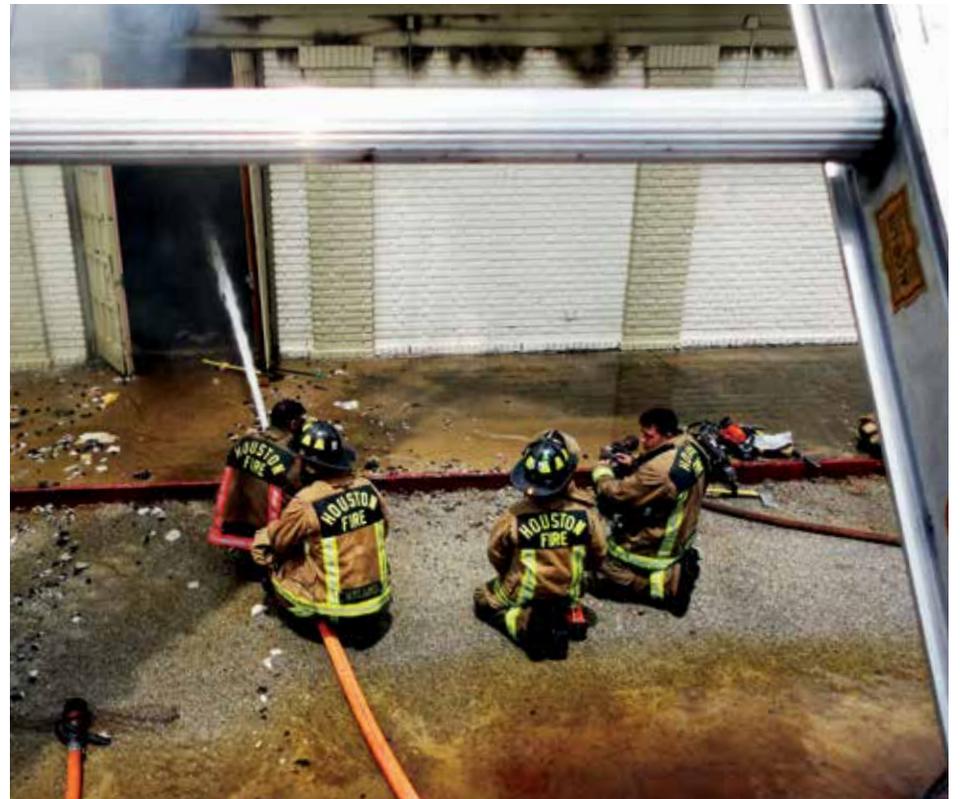
*...Suddenly, the ground shook and HFD was changed forever.*







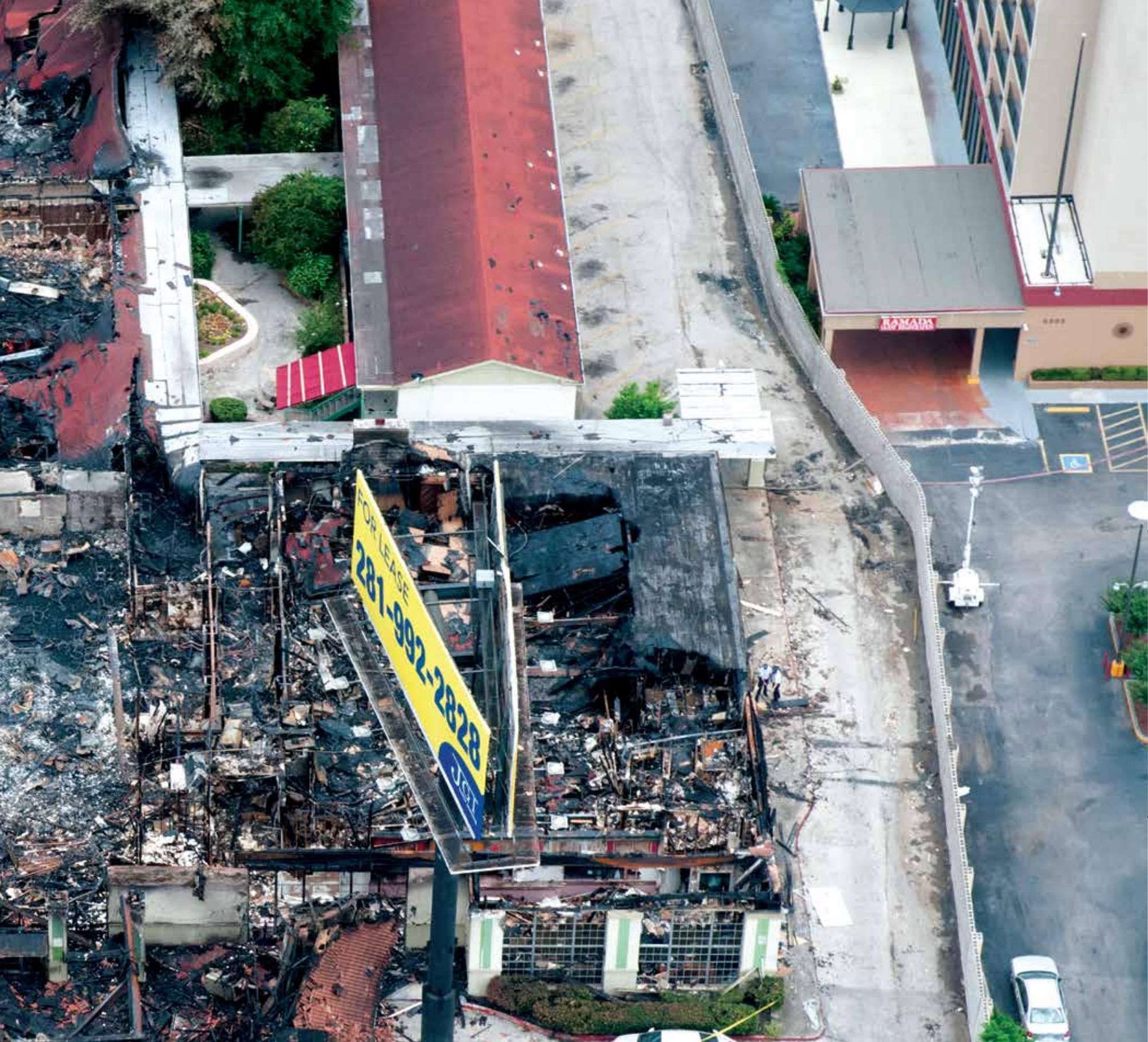


















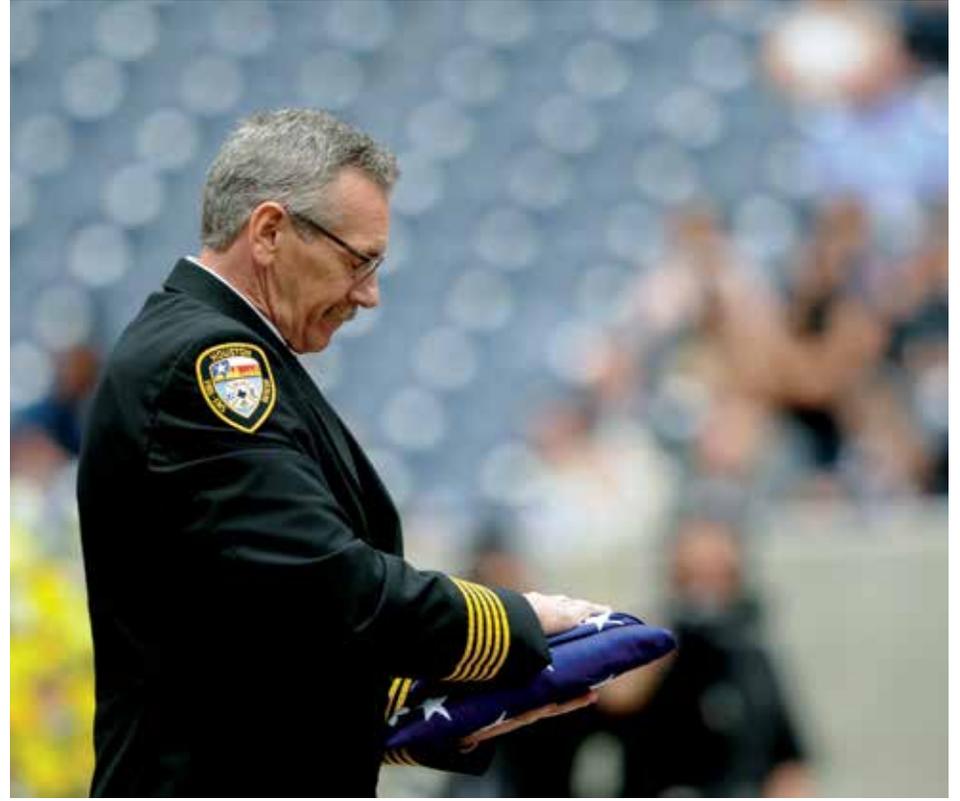














GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN





HFD

51

ENGINEER

HFD

51

CAPTAIN

# Matthew Rena Renaud



Matthew Rena Renaud was born July 2, 1977 to the proud parents Xavier and Barbara at Herman Hospital in Houston, TX. He was raised in a very close and loving family. Matthew's childhood was pretty normal by all means. He enjoyed family vacations, holidays, playing with his cousins and sometimes giving his older brother a hard time. Matthew quickly gained a love for baseball. Not only becoming a fan, but also being a die hard ball player. He started at a young age and played through high school. Upon graduating from North Shore High School in 1996, he received an Associates Degree from San Jacinto College.

I can honestly say Matthew lived life to its fullest. He loved his life, family, friends and his job. He worked hard and played hard. Matthew enjoyed traveling, sports and was an avid movie watcher. He loved quoting movie lines and would often stump the best of us. One of his biggest loves was of his Houston sports teams, and the Astros being the biggest. Every year, he and I would plan and take a trip to see the Astros play in another city. We were blessed enough to take seven of these "Astros Trips" together with other friends. Today as another way to honor and remember Matthew, we continue to take our yearly Astros trip which is now called "The Matthew Trip".

Matthew was always the jokester and prankster, so he fit right in at the fire stations. He never really expressed wanting to be a firefighter growing up. However, once the urge was there, he pursued it 100%. Matthew graduated 10th in his class from the Houston Fire academy in 2002. Upon graduation he found himself at Station 51 B, where he created bonds, friendships and his love for the station that he would always call home. He quickly rose through the ranks becoming an E.O. (Engine Operator) in 2007 and placing fourth on his captain's test in 2011. After receiving his captain's promotion, Matthew went home to Station 51 A. In the week of the fire at the Southwest Inn, Matthew had just completed taking the senior captain's test. Upon learning his test results he was guaranteed yet another promotion. He was often caught saying, "I've got to go save some lives". Whether he was ending a phone

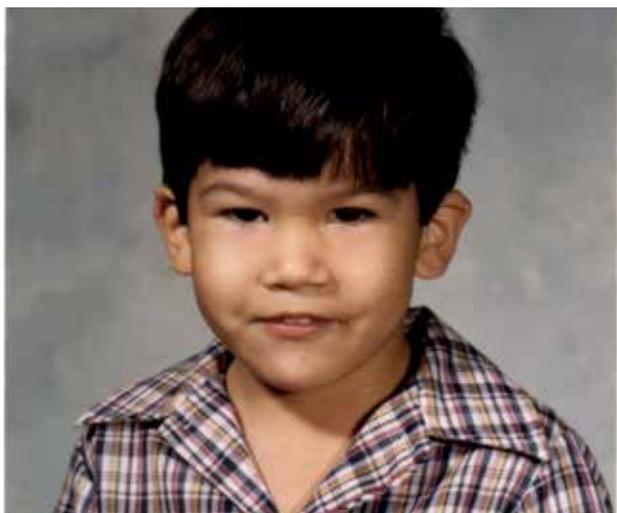
conversation while at the station, catching a run or being on tour the next day, he would often end a conversation with that saying that would become infamous amongst family and friends.

On April 27, 2013 Matthew received the Unit Meritorious Medal along with firefighters Joel Rincon and Walter Hayes. In April of 2012, Engine 51 entered an apartment on fire and pulled an unconscious victim out of a smoke filled apartment. They then completed their search and extinguished the fire. On the eve of the award ceremony, Matthew invited a few family members to the event. He said of the award, "it's no big deal, I was doing my job". That was my brother, never wanting recognition for something he was supposed to do.

We miss you every second of our days, Matthew. No one more than mom and dad. We love you with every inch of our heart and soul. It's difficult for me to understand this at times. What I do know, is my brother, best friend, hero and captain are gone.

I know upon entering that burning hotel on May 31, 2013 with his fellow brothers and sister, Captain Renaud had several thoughts racing through his head to get the job done. And I know a couple of other thoughts that probably crossed his mind, "it's no big deal, I'm doing my job" and "I got to go save some lives". For that Matthew, we are proud of you.

Written by his brother David Renaud







# Robert “Bobby” Ryan Bebee

Robert loved life to the fullest. He was dedicated to his family and friends. His day off in between his 2 jobs were filled with remodeling projects, showing up and supporting his nieces functions during school and after. He managed to do the same for his friends children as well.

He was a dedicated public servant, first as a deputy for Harris County Precinct 2, the he switched to being a Houston Firefighter at the age of 29. He also worked part time at the Jersey Village Fire Department.

He had an immense love for animals. He rescued and nursed back to health, with end result

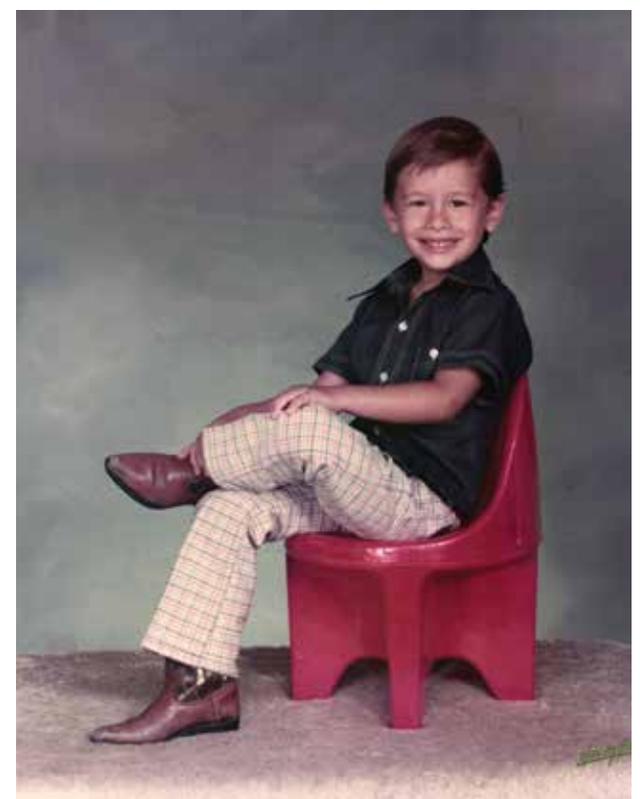
of being placed in a good home, usually his!

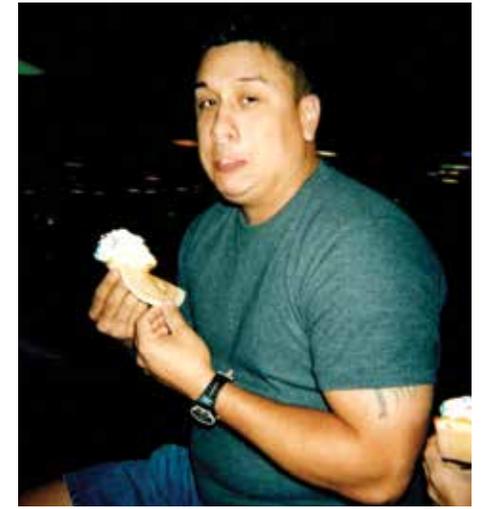
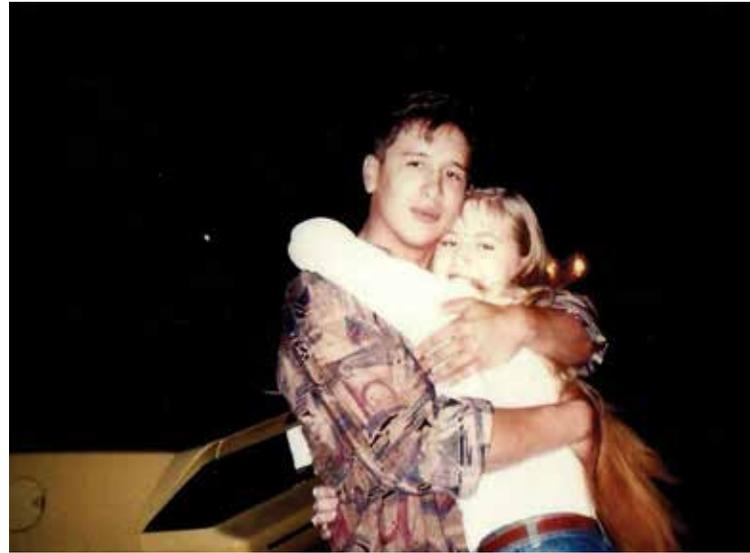
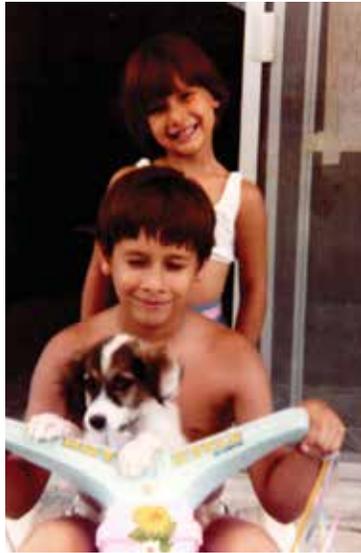
He silently worked to leave this world a better place.

He is an Honor, a hero and a beautiful gift for God.

May he rest in his glory.

Written by his mom Sabrina Bebee





# Robert Herman Garner IV



There are so many ways to describe our brother. He's super smart, witty, dedicated, selfless, loyal, has a huge heart, hilariously inappropriate, studious, a problem solver, and honest. Robert's the guy that everyone wanted to get to know and to have in their corner. He could find the positive side of any situation and loved to make people laugh. Robert was the quiet one in the group until he got to know you. Once he did though, he would constantly have you doubled over in stitches! He's been the same person his

whole life.

Not long after Robert graduated high school he decided he wanted to be a firefighter. As he began pursuing his dream, he looked into the Houston Fire Department but they weren't hiring at the time. So since that opportunity wasn't available he decided to join the United States Air Force and fight fires with them. Little did he know that wouldn't work out too well either. You see, in order to pass your physical you have to pass an eye exam. One small problem, he was color blind. So he had the bright idea to cheat the system and he asked the kid in front of him in line if he was color blind. The kid said no, so Robert asked him to yell the answers to the eye test really loud so he could memorize them and that way he would be able to pass the eye exam. The kid in line did exactly as he asked and Robert went in and repeated the answers verbatim. To my brother's surprise...he failed. Little did he know that the kid in front of him was also colorblind. This just goes to show you how badly he wanted to become a firefighter. Although he wasn't able to fight fires, he continued to serve his country for the next six years and completed two voluntary tours in the Middle East.

During his last six months in the service Robert decided he wanted to come home to Houston and continue to pursue his dream to be a firefighter. While still stationed in Nevada, he took leave to fly to Houston to take the civil service exam. After he completed his military service he moved back to Houston and within a few months he received his letter of acceptance to the Houston Fire Academy. That is one phone call that will never be forgotten. You could tell by the knot in his throat when he said "I got in" that he had received the letter he had anxiously been waiting on. He was so proud of that letter. It's so easy to picture the big cool-aid grin he must have had across his face. He was so excited that his dream was finally coming true.

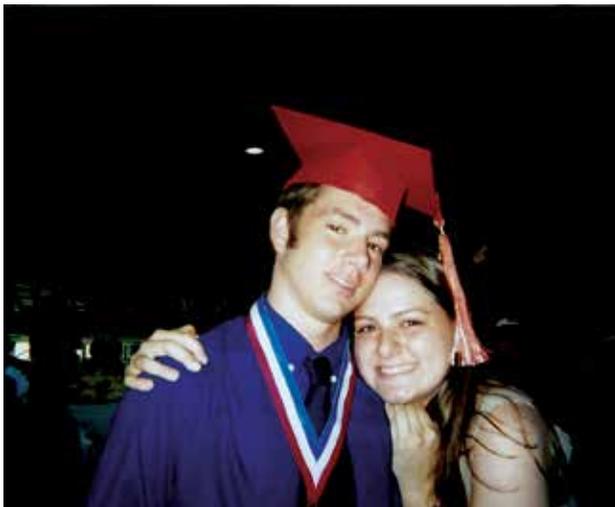
Not long after that he started the Fire Academy and boy

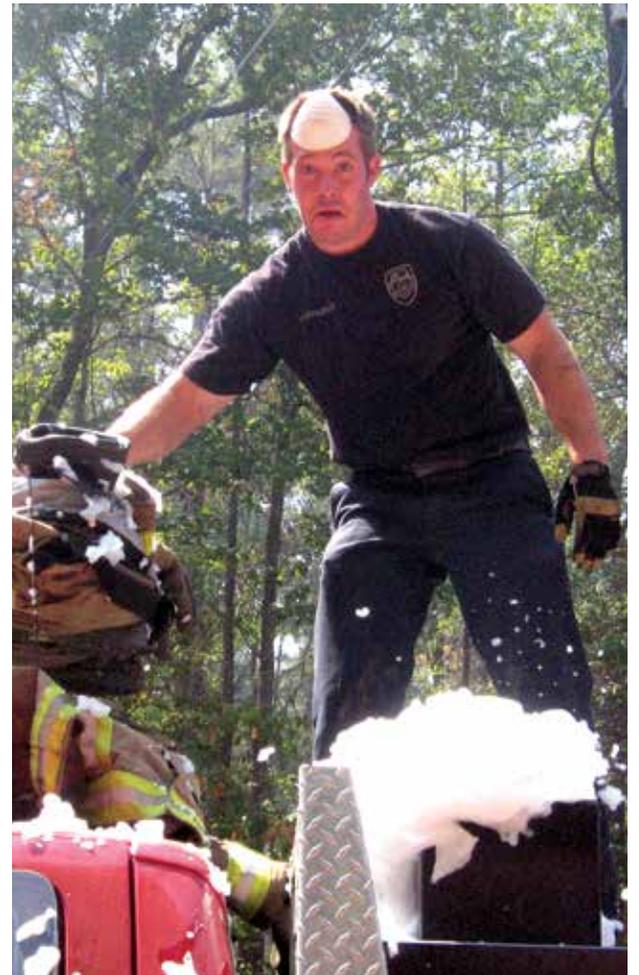
was he excited. In all his life our brother never cracked a book to make straight A's, but for the Fire Academy he was going to read every word... twice. He skipped out on family dinners and spending time with his friends because he was determined to do the very best he possibly could. Robert worked so hard, pushing himself, striving to be the best. His goal was to graduate at the top of his class so he would have first pick at the available fire stations. All of his efforts paid off when he graduated 2nd in his class, Class 2010 Bravo. He wanted nothing more than to be at Station 68 and that is exactly where he landed.

His time as a rookie definitely put him to the test. He learned a lot about himself and about serving others during that time. Once he was off probation he was sweating bullets that he would be moved to another station. He loved where he was and he had no desire to leave. After a few months passed Robert realized he would be staying at Station 68 and was beyond excited. The fire department was an extension of his family. Robert looked forward to every shift. He often spoke of the camaraderie that he felt. It was like his own little fraternity. In the time that he served at station 68 he did a lot of growing up. The men and women of the Houston Fire Department helped shape him into the man he became.

One of the last conversations that Robert had he said, "I finally get it." When asked what he meant, he said "This is what I am supposed to do with my life. I am going to do this until I can't or until I die." Robert was one of the most selfless, loving and dedicated people you could ever have known. He died living his dream and those that knew him knew he wouldn't have had it any other way.

**Written by his sisters.**







# Anne McCormick Sullivan

especially soccer. Anne may have been very shy in school and had to work extra hard for good grades, but when she stepped out on the ice, gym floor or soccer field, she found her confidence, joy, and talent. At age 4, she showed everyone at Christmas Eve Mass her gymnastic abilities. Anne did flips and round offs all the way from the altar back down the aisle and finished with a bow. Even our priest had to laugh!

In middle school Anne continued to play soccer and took up distance running. She put the same hard work into her school studies as she did athletics. As a result, she received the female Student of the Year Award in eighth grade. Anne was chosen not for the best grades, but for her tenacity to achieve to the best of her abilities.

Anne continued to run, joining her high school cross country and soccer teams. She was "Runner of the Year" for two years and in her senior year at Dulles High School she was awarded "Female Athlete of the Year". After receiving her honor, Anne asked her coach why she was chosen over athletes who had received full rides to college. Her coach replied "you won because you worked harder and pushed yourself more than any other athlete, never missing a practice or a game and always helping and encouraging your teammates."

At age 17, Anne decided to become a firefighter. True to her dream, Anne earned her firefighter and EMT certifications at Wharton Junior College and joined the Community and Stafford Volunteer Fire Departments, where she was nicknamed Punky and Mighty Mouse. Punky because Anne always wore her hair in a ponytail that bounced around when she ran and Anne was always running, usually three miles a day followed by 45 minutes on the stair master wearing a 15 pound vest. Anne was called Mighty Mouse because at 5'2" she could pick up a 180 pound man and carry him around the station.

This past January, Anne entered the Houston Fire Academy Fast Track program. One of the many

requirements of acceptance is to run 1.5 miles in under 13 minutes. Anne ran in a group of over 30 men and finished third. Afterwards she came home and disappointedly said "Mom, I didn't finish first in my heat, two guys pulled ahead of me just before the finish." I replied "Anne do you really think those guys wanted to go home and say they gotten beaten by a girl? I don't think so!" April 11, 2013, Anne graduated from the Houston Fire Department Val Jahnke Training Facility. Once again, she was a little disappointed that she was not first in her class. However, she did get her first pick of stations, Station 68 "A" Shift "busiest station in town" she said and she was thrilled. Anne was the happiest she had ever been in her life. She just got her dream job and was happily in love with her boyfriend of over two years, Dan.

On May 31, Anne along with Robert Garner, Matthew Renaud and Robert Bebee were among the first to arrive at the Southwest Inn fire. I can just see the excitement on her face. I have no doubt Anne raced her three firefighter brothers to heaven. I do not know if she was the first to arrive, but I do know Anne will be the first at heaven's gate when I arrive, with her hair in a messy pony tail, her boots untied, and that big ever-present Texas smile on her face greeting me saying "Mom, you won't believe it, I worked a 5 alarm fire today!"

Our family is very proud that Anne will be honored each year by the HFD Academy's Anne McCormick Sullivan Award for the cadet that best exemplifies hard work and perseverance. To quote her Academy instructor, Senior Captain Chris Hill, "she showed that of her 5'2" frame, 5'1" was heart.

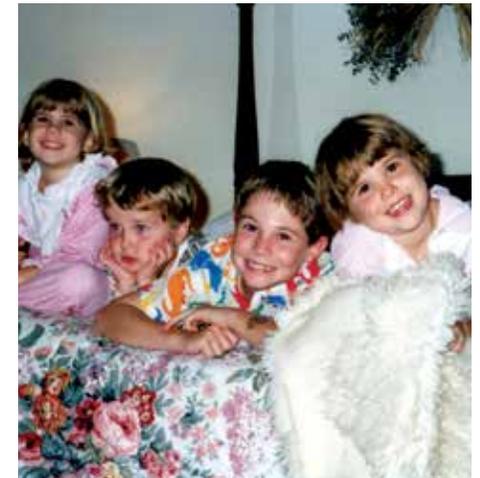
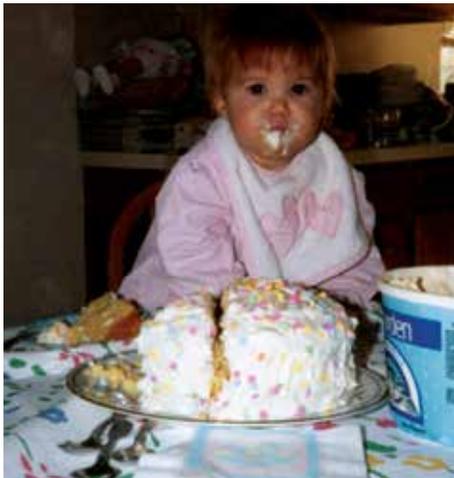
We love and miss you every day, Mom, Dad, Will, Kate and Thomas.

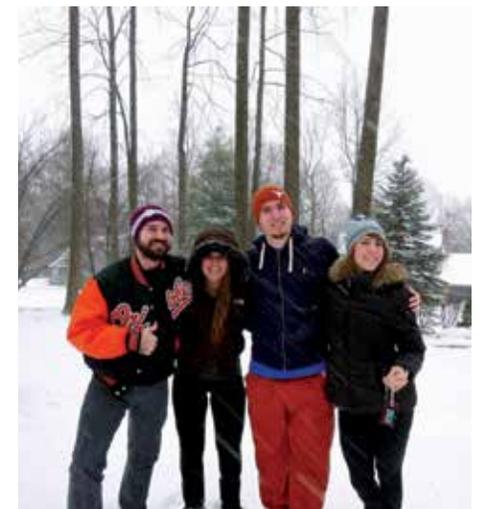
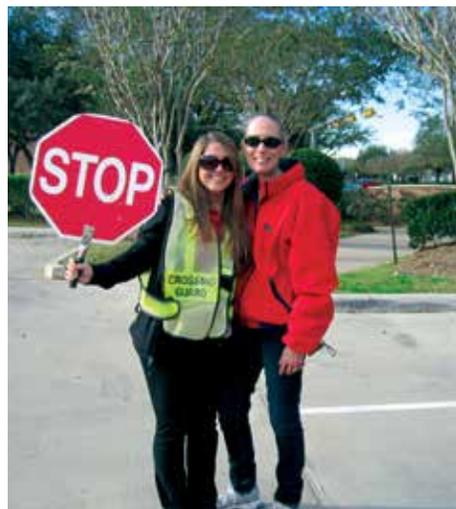
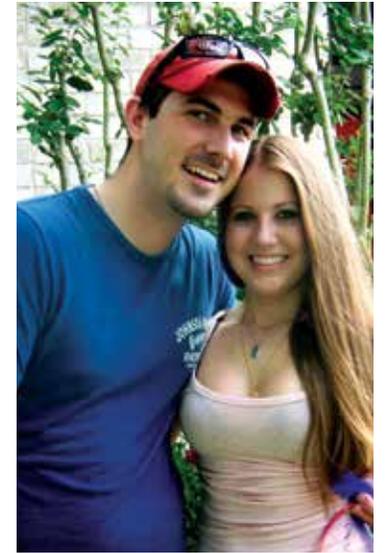
**Written by: Mary Sullivan, Anne's Mom**

Anne Sullivan was due to be born on Christmas Day 1988. Instead, she was an early gift delivered on December 4th. Anne continued to surprise all who knew her ever since. As soon as Anne was born, my mom, Anne's Nana, was on the next plane to Houston. Nana brought Anne a large sheepskin (Wooley) that would become Anne's constant companion and source of comfort the rest of her life. As a small child, Anne carried Wooley everywhere. Eventually she loved Wooley to pieces, literally. So then came Wooley 2, Wooley 3...

Anne loved adventure and was fortunate to travel to Europe on three occasions. Each time she crammed a piece of that sheepskin into her suitcase. Two weeks before Anne died, I found a new sheepskin in a drawer that I forgot I had purchased years ago. I gave it to Anne, and she was just as excited to receive this new Wooley as she was the first. I found it in her bed the morning of May 31st.

Anne's other love, from the time she was a small child was athletics in many forms, ice skating, gymnastics and





# Captain “Iron Bill” Dowling

May 31st, 2013...a day that will forever be embedded in my thoughts, in my actions, and even in my sleep. It's the call that no fire wife ever wants to receive, or in reality, thinks will ever happen. For me, the call was real, and it has changed my life, as I knew it, forever.

My husband, Captain William Ross Dowling, loved his job with every fiber of his being. He loved the busy house, the camaraderie and the practical jokes they would play on one another. His passion was God, family and the fire department. After May 31, 2013, I knew those days were over for him. He was trained to battle a blaze with precise accuracy, professionalism and passion. Now he is in the battle for his life.

Captain Dowling, or “Iron” Bill as we call him, suffered catastrophic injuries after entering the Southwest Inn around 12:08 PM on that tragic day in May. No one could have prepared us for the road that lay ahead. After entering the building, with four of his co-workers, the unthinkable happened. The roof came crashing in on them, fatally wounding 4, and pinning him, by his legs, to the floor. After a 45-minute extrication, he was rushed to the hospital where he lost both of his legs, was treated for

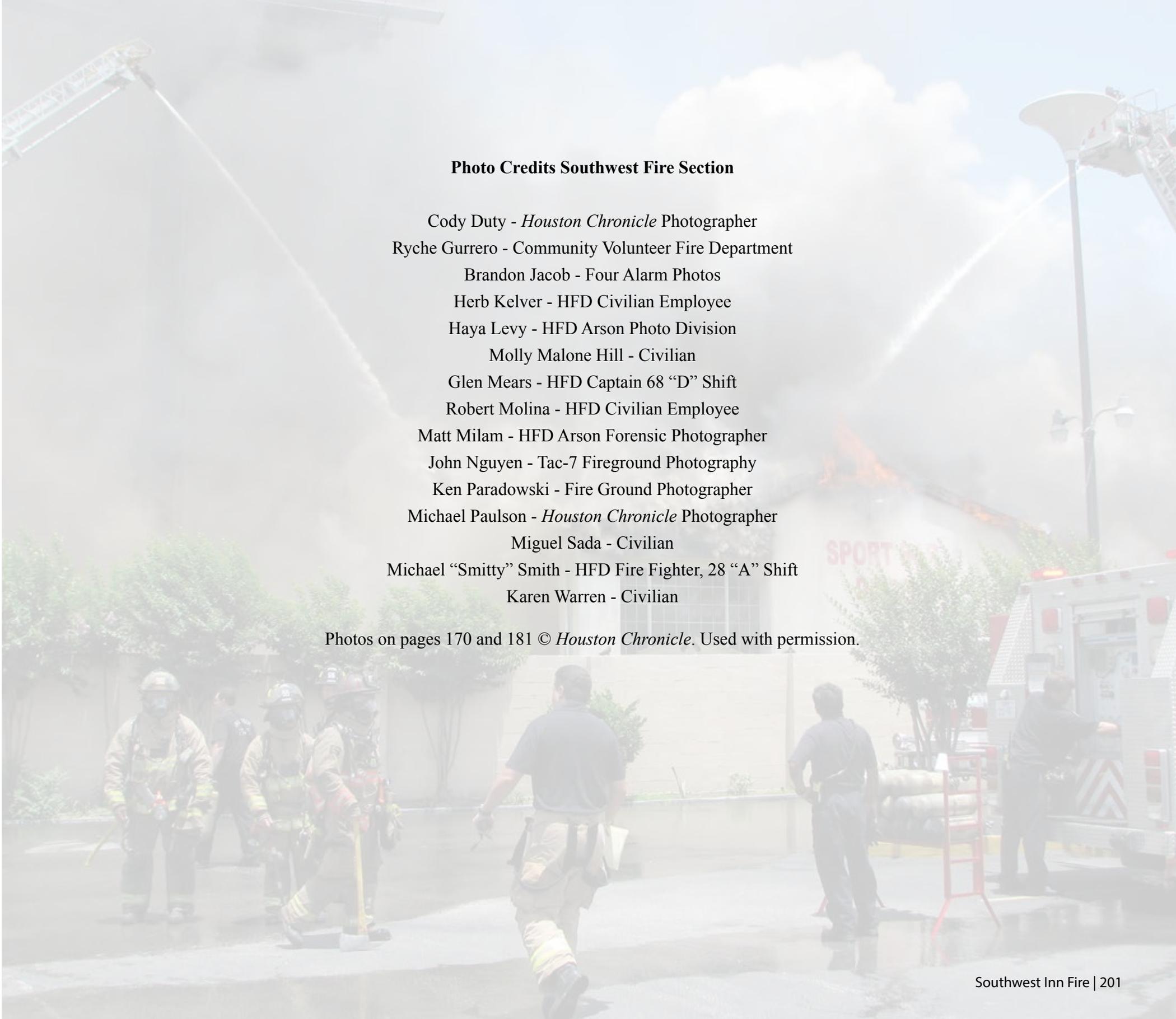
burns over 30% of his body, and subsequently suffered an anoxic brain injury.

There was little hope for his survival, and we were instructed to prepare for the worst, but God had other plans for Bill's life. He continues to overcome the odds, day by day. With intensive therapy, he is working hard to regain the life he once had. Each day is a challenge, which just motivates him to work harder. His co-workers, friends, and the community support him, volunteering to come daily to help him with his rehab.

We may never understand why God allowed this to happen, but our family has never doubted that it was part of his greater plan. We choose to focus on the positive, and we will never settle for anything other than a full recovery. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Cor. 5:17 ESV) With time, faith and persistence, a new normal will emerge, and we can move farther away from the day that forever changed our lives.

**Written by: Jacki Dowling, Bill's Wife**





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