



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

*Ronny J. Coleman*

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## **CONVERTS MAKE THE BEST ALLIES**

by

**Ronny J Coleman**

When a person is convinced change their mind on something they believe in, they often become even more of a zealot for the new way of thinking than the old way. One good example of this could be seen among anti-smokers. Many of the most strident and ardent anti-smokers were Mike off smokers themselves. Eric Hoffer, the longshoreman philosopher of many decades ago, once stated that a true believer of one thought can become just as intense a true believer of another thought. It is the belief that is more important than the behavior.

This idea came to me recently while I was listening to a radio show put on by radio station KZSB, (AM 1290) This low powered radio station is sponsored by a local Fire Safe Council. It puts on radio shows involving both adversaries and allies of fire related issues. The show that gave me this idea was one regarding a recent fire at Magic Castle in Hollywood California. I am not aware of how well this facility is known outside of the Western United States, but in California the Magic Castle is an iconic, hundred year structure that serves as the site for presentations by some of the world's most renowned magicians. It Mike off is the official Clubhouse of the Academy of Magical Arts.

The manager of that facility is 85-year-old Mildred Larsen. As I was listening to him on the show he was describing a fire that occurred in the Magic Castle in which fire sprinklers played a pivotal role in saving the building and the contents. The structure, built in 1908 has a basement and attic and occupies 3 floors. As one would expect the building has lots of nooks and crannies. Mr. Larson told the host of the show , Mike Williams that when he was first told that he had to sprinkle his building he was pretty upset. He expressed all of the standard reasons why he did not need a sprinkler system.. The Los Angeles city fire Department however did not take no for an answer. In 1976 they met with Larsen and the owners of the building and informed them that they would not allow the occupancy for the building to be as high as they desired unless the sprinklers were installed. As a result of that persistence a sprinkler system was installed. To say that it was done so begrudgingly is probably an understatement

However, fate has a funny way of sometimes rectifying rights from wrongs. On Halloween Day, September 11 of 2011 the Magic Castle caught fire. As an observer of a student of boat will building construction and fire behavior myself, I can reasonably predict that any fire in a building that old was going to be tough to fight. This structure was no exception. Unfortunately,



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the fire started when a roofer was attempting to make some repairs using a blow torch on the roof. As we all know, a fire starting on the exterior of a building is not meant to be easy to combat with a sprinkler system.

Upon arrival Los Angeles city fire units, an intense firefight occurred. However, according to Larsen the sprinkler system had already activated. According to observers of the event once the sprinkler heads begin to activate the fire started to become under control. Of course the fire department finished the job, because it was a shielded fire. Larsen jokingly stated in his interview that is number one rule he would like to follow in the future is don't have a fire at all. However he went on to say that if you are going to have fire the better protected you are the more likely you'll have a positive outcome. What does Larsen have to say about sprinklers today? He is a 100% converted believer

He has seen for himself the results of sprinkler protection and doesn't delude himself with the excuses for not doing it anymore. He is able to testify and bear witness to the simple statement that fire sprinklers do what they are supposed to do; they keep buildings from burning to the ground.

During the radio show, Larsen was quoted as saying "Thank God for the water, thank God for the sprinklers, the whole Castle could have been burned to the ground in a matter of minutes. " In conducting the interview Larsen was asked what he would say to any other business manager was being confronted with a decision to retroactively split sprinklers into a building that was old as the Magic Castle. His initial response to be told was like a lot of other people in that I thought the retrofit was not to be ugly and inappropriate. After it was in it was not nearly that terrible. The sprinkler system did not destroy the ambience of "this grand old place".

He then went on to share a story that an irreparable collection of Harry Houdini memorabilia was in the building. Larsen also noted that Harry Houdini died on Halloween October 21, 1926. That was Halloween also. He reportedly died approximately at 1130 that day. He noted that an entire room of artifacts dedicated to Houdini and where magicians often hold séances was directly under the fire. While there was water damage as one would expect, the artifacts survived.

If the fire would've gone unchecked it would likely have destroyed. Houdini's other collection housed in Clifton Hills in Niagara Falls Ontario was destroyed by fire in 1995. That building was not sprinklered.

One of the things noted by Larsen was how much he was surprised by how many firefighters it took to totally control the situation. According to his recollection there were 125 firefighters



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involved in the operation. In addition he was totally overwhelmed by how much time and effort they put into the salvage operation to assure that the building was restored to service. Interestingly enough, the Magic Castle was opened on Friday, 13 January 2012. Larsen seemed to want to give a mystical turn to every coincidence in the story. But his faith in sprinklers and insurance was rock solid.

There are millions of buildings in our country have been standing a long time and have not burned down. Unfortunately many of those buildings, some of them historical in nature, will be destined to be destroyed as a result of any number of natural events that are likely to occur in the future. I have said in other columns that all buildings are destined to burn down, fall down or be torn down. The one we can do the most about is the burned down part we can. We can put in sprinklers

As an advocate of fire sprinklers we need to make the argument for the installation of red directing sprinklers in high-risk occupancies especially, especially those of historical and economic value to our communities

At the end of the show Larsen was asked if he had any recommendations for other business owners. Larsen, who has owned three separate theaters in his life, again made the comment “don’t have a fire, but if you do be prepared for it.” He was he was speaking from personal experience when he reflected on the fact he had a fire in his home in 1965 that destroyed his entire Magic Library. You could hear in his voice the pain of the loss when he stated:”I still want to look up something from time to time and realize that was lost in the fire. You never get over it.” You should be prepared by having sprinklers in place before the fire.

Tonight there will probably be a show held in the Magic Castle in which people will be awed by the Magic especially when it is up close and personal. It’s hard to figure out where those coins come from out of ears and how those cards perform their tricks, but perhaps the greatest miracle was that decision to put a sprinkler system in that building so that not only the building survived, but the contents of that building are preserved so that other generations will enjoy the show.

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