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Dean Logan's Blog

RWU Law Students Get the Gripping Story behind the “Station Fire” Litigation

Posted by David Logan on 04/26/2013 at 01:05 PM

On February 20, 2003, a fire engulfed “The Station,” a small nightclub in rural Rhode Island, killing 100 and severely burning many more. The horrific event - the worst rock concert catastrophe ever - triggered almost a decade of legal maneuvering, as lawyers for the many severely injured people were thrown into an incredibly complex case, full of untested legal procedures and theories. Among them: the first case under the “Multiforum, Multiparty Trial Jurisdiction Act of 2002”; whether sloppy work by government fire inspectors was protected by sovereign immunity; how to force some “deep pocket” defendants into the case; and how to fairly distribute the \$176 million of assets that eventually made up the pool of funds available to plaintiffs who had widely different levels of injury.

RWU Law students have already been lucky to learn about the cases in a unique upper-level “capstone course” taught by Mark Mandell, one of the lead lawyers for the plaintiffs, that among other innovations has students actually meet with some of his clients who survived the tragedy. <http://law.rwu.edu/blog/learning-litigation-tragedy-station-fire-course>

The entire student body recently had a chance to hear from another of the leading lawyers involved in the case, John Baryllick, who not only helped craft and implement the successful legal strategy, but now has written what may be a definitive account of the resolution of a mass tort, “Killer Show: The Station Nightclub Fire, America’s Deadliest Rock Concert.” <http://killershowbook.com/>

And what a fascinating presentation it was! Joined by one of our alums, Jenna Hashway (’11) (who provided research assistance), John spun an amazing tale of intrepid lawyering, as well as incredibly irresponsible behavior on the part of many of the key players.

For example, the club was allowed to admit many more people than could safely be in the building; there was no sprinkler system; and the few exits that existed were very difficult to locate in an emergency (one was even papered over and functionally inaccessible). Most tragically, the owners installed soundproofing that was cheap, and highly flammable, which meant that a small fire caused by pyrotechnics quickly engulfed the entire club, and its terrified guests.

Perhaps most interesting to me as a Torts teacher was John’s recounting of the meticulous work that plaintiffs’ lawyers had to do to prove exactly how the fire spread so quickly, which required highly sophisticated forensic work.

Here are some pictures from that fascinating presentation.

