

# BC3 fire instructor uses own mayday incident to educate firefighters

“You have to let people know what happened... so that it doesn't happen to somebody else”

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(Butler, PA) Butler County Community College's interim coordinator of fire and hazmat training programs who serves as a first-responder is using his March 26 mayday experience during a two-alarm blaze to teach others how to avoid the four scenarios that could have cost him his life, and others theirs.

Kevin Smith was unaware he was in danger that Sunday morning, when the 46-year-old assistant chief of the South Butler Volunteer Fire Department – and father of sons Christopher, 20, and Hunter, 18, and husband of 23 years to wife, Sheila – responded to a blaze in downtown Butler.

Smith entered the burning three-story building wearing 50 pounds of gear and dragging a 1¾-inch hose capable of distributing 150 gallons of water each minute. He also wore a cylinder containing a 20-minute supply of compressed air for breathing.

The 10-minute presentation he has shown since March 26 to 150 firefighters from nine regional departments – and will show at the Butler County Fire School on June 3-4 at BC3, and at BC3's statewide fire instructor conference Nov. 4-5 that he estimates will draw 180 – identifies four areas labeled as having “went wrong” during the battle to save the Center Avenue building that housed apartments and a restaurant.

They are four areas that left him separated from three other volunteers from his and another department, alone, disoriented and unable to see inside the inferno: smoke, entanglement, complacency and situational awareness.

“The biggest thing that I have been telling people as I go through this is, ‘I have been in the fire service for a long time,’” Smith said. “‘I have been a fire instructor for a long time. We teach a whole lot of stuff that you are supposed to do. And I can tell you there was a lot of stuff that just didn't happen.’”



Marked in blue is the entry path that Kevin Smith, assistant chief of the South Butler Volunteer Fire Department, took while this building on Center Avenue in Butler was engulfed in flames on March 26. After firefighters were told to evacuate due to conditions, Smith – BC3's interim coordinator of fire and hazmat training programs – became disoriented by the opaque smoke and entanglements. He eventually broke through a window and was rescued.

Smith would be saved after being seen hanging out a third-story window on another side of the building, the tank of compressed air he needed to breathe nearly empty.

## Smoke: Visibility “zero”



Kevin Smith, BC3's interim coordinator of fire and hazmat training programs, and assistant chief of the South Butler Volunteer Fire Department.

A volunteer firefighter since he joined the Marshall Township Volunteer Fire Department in Allegheny County at age 19, Smith knew the 127-year-old structure had been searched, its residents evacuated.

“There was nobody in the building,” he said. “We were basically looking to put the fire out at that point.”

Visibility, however, was “zero” as soon as he entered a door off a third-story fire escape, Smith said.

“You couldn’t see anything when you walked in,” he said. “A lot of smoke.”

Smith stepped inside, holding a hose line while three other firefighters tried to poke open the ceiling to access the flames.

“Smoke conditions were pretty dark,” Smith said. “The best way I can explain it is if you close your eyes, you can still see light. Then take your hand and cover overtop your closed eyes. See how black that gets? That’s how I got into the building. It went from being dark to being really dark.”

It’s an account Smith has shared with students in classes conducted by volunteer fire departments in Pine Township, Mercer County; West Lebanon, Indiana County; and Girard, Erie County; and at the Warren County Fire School in Warren. He has also presented to volunteer fire departments in Manor Township, Armstrong County; and in Cranberry and Butler townships, Butler County.

## Entanglement: “We kept moving forward”

The crew fought through 15 feet interior entanglements. Smith battled 5 additional feet down a hallway. He had five minutes of air remaining in his cylinder.

A call was made for more hose lines and for the roof to be cut open to allow smoke and heat to escape, Smith said.

“Things weren’t happening as quickly as we wanted them to,” Smith said.

Progress slowed as Smith and his crew encountered unseen wires, furniture, items scattered about the floor.

Smith could now see the fire.

“We were hitting it,” he said. “It started getting hot. It’s like, ‘We need to get out.’ Because it’s just not changing. ‘We need to get out.’”

That call for evacuation was relayed to the incident commander, and air horns affixed to an emergency vehicle were blared.

“So that everyone knows to get out,” Smith said. “We all knew to exit.”

## Complacency: Failure to follow walls

Smith tells his students that the third scenario that could have cost him his life was not following walls in the darkness and dropping his fire hose.

“You should stay along the walls so you know where you are so you can find your way back out,” Smith said. “We weren’t really doing that. We just saw fire and we were going in and we were hitting fire as we were going. As dark as the conditions were, knowing that we were getting entangled in some stuff, we probably should have said, ‘Hey, maybe this isn’t the smartest thing to keep going.’ And we kept going. Because we thought we could get it. You get that mentality, ‘We can stop this. We can get it done.’”

As the air horn shrieked, Smith’s crew turned and grabbed the hose line, and followed it toward the door.

“As they got to the end of the hose, I wasn’t there,” Smith said. “I wasn’t on it anymore.”

Because the hose had snagged on an unseen object, Smith had set it down to try to address the problem.

“And whenever I went to find it again,” he said, “I could not find it. And I thought, ‘I need to get out.’”

He felt his way to find a doorway he believed he had earlier traveled through.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “I was misdirected in my mind.”

His crew members, safe on the third-floor fire escape from which they entered the burning building, yelled back for a response from Smith.

Firefighters can hear one another through voice amplifiers on their masks, Smith said.

“You can hear all right with it,” he said.

Except he didn’t, and did not respond.

“They are the ones who called the mayday,” said Smith, a veteran of 200 fires, “because I was missing.”

## Situational awareness: “I just went the opposite way”

Without the hose to guide him, Smith turned the wrong way, deeper into the inferno.

“I just went the opposite way as everybody else,” he said.

Over the next 30 seconds, firefighters re-entered the building to look for their missing assistant chief. Among the searchers was one of Smith’s crew members who in another mayday call had pulled a fallen firefighter from a burning structure, a volunteer who later died from his injuries.

Smith himself has heard only one mayday call in his life, during a training session – “a house we were burning” – and one that ended noneventful.

Among the estimated 1.1 million firefighters in 2014 were 788,000 volunteers, according to National Fire Protection Association.

Forty-seven of the 90 firefighters who died in the line of duty or while training in 2015 were volunteers, the U.S. Fire Administration states. More than 29,100 were injured that year, the National Fire Protection Association reports.

“I know three guys who have died,” Smith said. “You talk to firefighters all the time. There are close calls out there.”

Ambient temperatures inside the building were 200 Fahrenheit degrees, and in the flame-engulfed ceiling, 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit, Smith estimates.

A disoriented Smith was feeling his way along an exterior wall with hand protection “double the thickness of a leather work glove.”

“I had a thermal-imaging camera with me,” he said. “I held it to my face and I couldn’t see anything.”

Only by his sense of touch in noticing the interruption in the wall did Smith come upon and smash the bedroom window.

“At that point, when (searchers) were going in was the same time crews from the outside saw the window break and they saw me at the window,” Smith said. “So I knew I was found, but that wasn’t really relayed back to the crews who were searching for me for probably another 30

seconds or so. So once that was determined, everybody backed out. They knew I was at the window. I had a ladder thrown up to me.”

Smith had hooked his foot and his arm inside the sill of the window as he hanged from it. Firefighters extended a ladder to the third-floor window to rescue Smith.

“Right there when I was coming down the ladder I actually had to stop to disconnect my air.” Smith said. “My mask sucked to my face because I was out of air.”

More than 9,240 firefighters from 27 counties underwent training in 2016 at BC3, which offers more than 200 firefighting and hazmat courses.

“We have the largest number of classes held in Western Pennsylvania,” Smith said.

Those who have heard his presentation, Smith said, are grateful.

“Getting lost isn’t a heroic thing,” he said. “It’s a screw-up, and that’s truthfully what it was. I’m not too proud to say that I screwed up. Because I did. I screwed up. Things happened that should not have happened. I put people’s lives in danger. And I just want to put it out there that if you can keep training to be not able to do that, that is what we are out there to do. You have to let people know what happened so maybe they can do something so that it doesn’t happen to somebody else.”

## Promoting the positives

His students and firefighters will also hear about what went right that day, Smith said, adding that a mayday was called, a search conducted, a ladder deployed and he employed self-survival skills in hooking his limbs to the window.

“We teach people all the time in our firefighter survival class that when you go out a window, hook your foot or hook your arm on the inside of the window,” he said, adding that the precaution is important because it may not be a window positioned where a firefighter thought it might be.

Smith initially thought he was crashing through a window that led to the fire escape from which he and his crew entered the building.

The window through which he crashed dropped three stories.

“Because whenever I came out that window, I hooked my foot and my arm,” Smith said. “I was actually almost all the way out the window and I basically climbed my way back in before I would have fallen to the ground.”

## Learning opportunities

Smith calls the March 26 mayday experience his closest call with injury or worse, and that he feels fortunate.

“I think the training that has been done, not only for me, but for everybody else, has helped out,” he said. “People knew as soon as that window was broken, they got a ladder to me right away. People were searching for me. It all worked out the way it is supposed to because of the training that people do around here.”

While he said he tries not to think about what could have happened, he does think about what to teach others to prevent what could have happened.

“Stick to the basics,” he said. “Stay along the wall. Don’t let go of the hose. If I would have never let go of that hose, I would have never had an issue. Because either they would have found me or I would have been able to trace my way back outside. I would have followed it back out. And they would have followed it in. Keep training. Know when is the time to be in there and when is the time to say, ‘We aren’t helping this at all. We aren’t doing any better to this.’”

To schedule Smith for a presentation, call (724) 287-8711 Ext. 8354 or email [kevin.smith@bc3.edu](mailto:kevin.smith@bc3.edu).