

Fourteen years later, Gina Russo, Station Fire survivor, looks to future

After years of being the most visible and vocal survivor of the West Warwick Station nightclub fire of 2003, Gina Russo is looking forward to moving on. Now approaching 50, Russo spoke of her retirement plans from the front of a Brown University classroom.

“It’s all about celebrating life and that’s what I’m going to do,” she said. She plans to spend a lot of time with her four grandchildren, as well as at her house in Seabrook, New Hampshire.

“I call it my happy place,” she said, “Because it’s Station-free.”

Fourteen years after the tragic fire that took all of her hair, much of her skin, and most painfully, her fiancé, Alfred “Fred” Crisostomi, Russo’s attitude is one of perseverance. “I’m either going to sink from it or rise above,” she said. “I’ve chosen to rise above.”

And rise above she has, with a remarkably positive attitude and a mindset focused on the future. Today, Russo emphasizes the importance of learning from the tragedy. One effort to educate comes in the form of remembrance as well – as the president of the Station Fire Memorial Fund, Russo has been working for years to build a memorial park in the spot where the nightclub burned.

On May 21st, 2017 at 2:00 PM, the park will finally open. The memorial will honor Crisostomi and the 99 other “angels,” as she calls them, who lost their lives that night. It will also serve as an educational piece, with a timeline and history of the Station and other, similar fires.

Looking back

On the night of February 20th, 2003, Russo and her fiancé, Alfred “Fred” Crisostomi, decided last-minute to go to the Station Nightclub in West Warwick for a Great White concert. During the first song, a spark from the show’s pyrotechnics caught on a black drape in the drummer’s alcove and swiftly set the concert venue ablaze. As a thick black smoke started to engulf the club and concertgoers realized that this wasn’t part of the show, Russo and Crisostomi tried to leave through the nearby fire exit, but the bouncer wouldn’t let them through the door. Russo recalls wasting precious seconds arguing with him. The last thing she remembers is Crisostomi putting his hand on the middle of her back, pushing her, and shouting “Go!” He pushed her so hard that she went flying through people and made it to the front door. “At that point,” she recalled, “bodies were already piling up in the doorway.”

Russo spent what she thought were her last seconds praying to God for her kids to have a good life and to forgive her for dying this way. Then she hit the black floor.

Ten weeks later, Russo woke up from a drug-induced coma with the odds against her.

“There was all this, ‘You probably will never...’” she recalls. “Somewhere along the line I kind of adopted this attitude of, well, you can tell me no but I am going to.”

Determined to improve, Russo would wait until her physical therapist left her house and then she would start her own therapy all over again. Doctors said she would probably never go back to work, but she did so in 2006, and even wrote and published a book about the fire in the meantime.

Russo wasn't always the resilient, determined woman she is now, however. Reflecting on her life, she said, "I was this knocked-down person," adding that she had always had self-esteem issues. Previously, she was in an abusive marriage for thirteen years. Somehow, she found the strength to get a divorce, and a few years later, she met Fred Crisostomi.

"He completely changed my world," Russo said. "He put me on this pedestal...that I can't even describe." Even though he is physically gone, Russo says his optimism for life is what motivates her now. "He's definitely a lot of my strength."

Russo admits that since the fire, without Fred, she's had moments of doubt and shaken faith.

"There were some dark moments when I wondered if it was worth it," she said. Mainly, she was angry at the many people she blames for the fire: the Station's owners for permitting a crowd larger than their licensed capacity and for blocking the exits, Great White for shooting off pyrotechnics, and the town for letting flammable packing foam be glued to the nightclub's walls.

"I had a lot of resentment for a lot of years. I was really angry at the stupidity of people," she said. "Ultimately," however, "it was consuming to let them rent that much space in my head."

Raised a Catholic for years, Russo also found herself angry with God. "How do you let this happen?" she remembers asking. After the fire, her brother encouraged her to try theophostic ministry, which involves prayers in which a person "throws their anger up to God." She did try it, and walked out of the church thinking, "Yeah, okay, I'm still really pissed off," she recalled with a laugh. But later, when the Attorney General announced that only three people would be held accountable for the fire—the band manager and the two brothers who owned the club—something changed.

"I thought, 'Oh my god, I've had enough. It's all yours, God. I can't keep living like this,'" Russo said. "I walked away a completely different person." Afterwards, as the indictments and trials occurred, "it was sad and it was hard," she remembers, "but the true hatred and anger were gone."

Looking forward

Today, Russo's attitude is one of determination; she has decided to take her pain and turn it into something constructive.

"What went wrong that night, in this day and age, never should have happened," she said. "So let's take our event, our tragedy, and educate." She added, "That's what I hope we're doing."

Most would say they're succeeding. In addition to talking about fire safety at schools around the country, Russo has also been working to build a memorial park in the spot where the nightclub burned. As president of the Station Fire Memorial Fund, she aims for the park to also serve as an educational piece, with a timeline and history of the Station Nightclub and references to other, similar fires.

For Russo, it's all about getting the story out there "the right way." The park, set to open in May, is designed to evoke elements of music, which meant so much to everyone at the Station that fateful night. It will include personal monuments shaped like the back of a speaker for each person who lost his or her life in the fire. Russo hopes that eventually the individual monuments will also have interactive digital chips through which visitors can learn about the victims' lives.

Ultimately, Russo's goal is to provide peace for the families and friends of those who died 14 years ago.

"I can only hope that this will sort of give them a little bit to know that we've gained something beautiful out of something so tragic," Russo said. "We'll see."

Russo certainly believes that she herself has gained that. Remarkably, when it comes to the fire, she "really wouldn't change it," she said, adding "I know that sounds insane." She points to the fact that she's been able to give back to people in ways she never thought she would—such as volunteering at a burn clinic—and that she's met amazing people. Fred's optimism remains a driving factor in her efforts to look at things positively.

When asked about when she was able to let Fred go, Russo responded, "I don't think I ever really [did]." But if she hasn't let go, she has at least made room. She didn't want to be alone, and, she said, "Life is too short. It's worth living. Fred was that kind of guy who would say, go out there, live."

Russo tells of how when she went out and dated after the fire, Fred would appear in her dreams and say, "Don't you dare talk to that person, that's not the one. When it's the right one, I will go away."

When Russo went to bed after her first date with Sherman, there was no Fred in her dreams. So she agreed to a second date, and then a third.

In a few months, they will have been married for 10 years.

Looking around at the classroom of students hanging onto her soft-spoken words, Russo smiles.

"I have not dreamed of Fred in 10 years."