

### Three Families: The aftermath of the Ramsey explosion.

"I was working in the dental clinic at the Hennepin County Medical Center," explained Jane Smith. "The helicopter dispatcher called to say they were bringing my husband Bob to HCMC. At first I thought he was joking. Then he told me Bob had requested HCMC because I worked there. My first thought was, 'Bob is talking; it must be ok.' Then I realized that if he was being brought in by helicopter, something was really wrong, something was terribly wrong."

And so began the long journey for three families whose loved ones were in the Ramsey gas explosion on December 28, 2004.

Amy Self says it began with her son turning on the TV.

"My son was watching the morning news and told me a real estate building was on fire in Ramsey. He did not need to be watching things like that so I was going to turn it off. I heard the name of the building and just lost it. That was the building where my mom worked."

Lyla Burkman, who lost her sister Lorraine Melton, is a nurse. One of her patients was watching the fire on TV and she happened to see a map of the location on the news. She knew immediately and ran to call her sister. She got only voicemail.

It was a nightmare for each

family. While Amy Self and her father and the Melton and Burkman families waited to hear news of their missing loved ones, Jane Smith waited in the ER for permission to see her husband.

"The doctor came out of the stabilization room and asked if I had ever seen a burn patient. I had worked with some up in dentistry. When I went in there were people all around him. Someone stepped back so I could get near Bob. I leaned over and told him that I loved him and he is in the best place to be and in good hands. I walked away and did not touch him as I could tell he was critically injured and I could see his hands were badly burned."

Meanwhile the other families waited and prayed for good news. "Then they came in with rings," said Amy Self. "I recognized my mother's ring and knew she was gone."

"When we knew for sure we all broke down," said Lyla Burkman. "My first thought was the kids. Lorraine was the single parent of a 14- and 12-year-old. We had to take care of her children."

One element all three families had in common was their faith and the closeness the colleagues had shared. "Bob kept asking me over and over what happened to the others," said Jane Smith.

In addition to shock and grief, in the first few days after the accident families had to deal with reporters. Jane Smith was questioned several times by the detectives and Fire Marshall. One

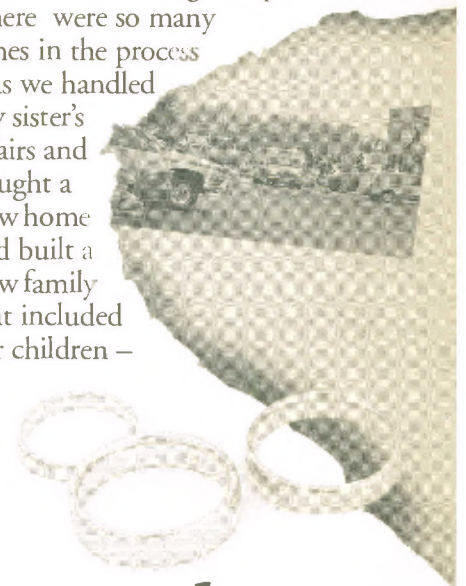
family received a large medical bill stamped "pay immediately." Legal and financial issues immediately added stress to their terrible losses.

"If any friend of mine ever had something like this happen to them, I would drive them right to Soucie & Bolt," said Lyla Burkman. Amy Self recommends, "Call a lawyer right away – you will need them."

Yet most of us find that a big step to take. "I was afraid to hire an attorney. We are not the type who sues people," said Jane Smith. "But Bob's boss insisted we needed someone to help us. Fred Soucie told me to refer everyone who called or contacted us to him. He said I should take care of Bob and leave everything else to him."

All three families found the low key style and real caring of the people at Soucie & Bolt a relief. "From the first I knew Dave Bolt was all about taking care of the children. I am not an attorney so I knew I needed legal help.

There were so many times in the process – as we handled my sister's affairs and bought a new home and built a new family that included her children –



... because bad things happen to *good* people

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## Cover: continued

I was just hanging by a thread. They got me through," says Lyla Burkman.

"It was so much more than the legal work. Sometimes I would come home from the hospital at night exhausted and feeling so alone. Then Fred would call to see how I was," said Jane Smith.

"I just wanted to know my dad would be taken care of," said Amy Self. "And Fred did that for us. The team is very down-to-earth, not at all stuffy. Our family would not have liked the more suit and tie types. We got to know them very well over two years and it was comforting to know how much they cared about us."

An improperly installed T-joint was blamed for the explosion, which leaked gas through the soil and into the Premier Properties building

through its concrete block foundation. Nobody inside the building detected a gas odor because the odorant gets "scrubbed out" as gas migrates through soil. The cases were settled without going to court.

Bob Smith suffered serious burns, a broken back, a serious head injury, three broken ribs, a shattered left foot and broken right ankle. His pancreas, liver and heart were damaged when he was slammed into a wall at about 40 mph from the explosion. Amazingly, he left the hospital after several months and now works at a bank.

Lyla Burkman and her husband sold their family home and bought a new home to include her niece and nephew into her family.

Amy Self says her dad is doing "very well." She has opened a home daycare business and says, "It really made our family pull together."

## When *bad* things happen. Advice from *good* people.

"Ask people you love what they would want before something happens. I wish I had talked to my sister about what she would have wanted for her children. I would have done whatever she asked."  
*Lyla Burkman*

"Let your attorney do the worrying. If Fred offers to deal with everything—even things that are not his responsibility like workers compensation—let him take care of everything!" *Jane Smith*

"Keep a notebook with you to write everything down. Call a lawyer early. If I had to do it over again, I would have called them right away." *Amy Self*