Imperial Chicken Plant Fire

Imagine being at work when suddenly the lights go out and someone starts yelling, “There’s a fire! We need to get out of here! This place is on fire!” Imagine fumbling your way in the dark and the smoke to an exit…only to find it was locked…from the outside. This is exactly what happened to Lilly Davis and 80 other workers on September 3, 1991 at the Imperial Foods chicken processing plant. Here’s part of her account of what happened after she, along with several other co-workers reached the locked door.

“I said, ‘Lord, what am I going to do? How can I get out of here?” Davis said. “And I heard a voice to my right that said, ‘Just sit down right here where you are.’ So, I said, ‘What in the world can I do from right here? I can’t see. If only I had some light I could get out.’ And that voice said, ‘You can pray.’”

Davis said she sat down on the floor and began to pray. She doesn’t remember how long she prayed or what she was praying.

“Then a hole opened up in the ceiling,” she said. “I remember feeling so peaceful and good, and then I just fell asleep.”

“I was told by the rescue squad people I was put in a bag and they were getting ready to zip me up,” she said. “But then I coughed once, and that’s the only thing that saved me.”

Written by Melonie McLaurin of the Richmond County Daily Journal

Investigators determined two exits were locked from the outside and a loading dock was also blocked. 12 employees wound up in a cooler that had no exit. There bodies were found in the cooler and three more bodies were found just outside. The plant lacked automatic heat-detection sprinkler systems, the exits weren’t marked, fire doors didn’t meet national safety standards, and the large building only had ONE fire extinguisher. The plant also lacked an evacuation plan.

The fire was reported by the plant owner’s son – who came running into the fire department that the plant was on fire. The owner had ordered the doors be locked (from the outside) because he suspected workers were stealing chickens.

The loss of life and emotional and physical damage to the workers, their families, and the town itself, did not have to happen. It is obvious from the investigation findings the following factors contributed to the deaths:

- Blocked and locked exits
    - All exits must be unlocked whenever anyone is present in a building.
    - Aisle ways and exits must be clear of obstructions.
- No fire suppression systems
    - Check with local, state, and federal codes to determine fire suppression requirements.
    - This is generally something the building’s owner/facility management takes care of – but if you have any concerns get informed and ask questions!
- Insufficient number of fire extinguishers
    - Generally, extinguishers must be clearly located where they will be readily accessible and immediately available in the event of fire.
    - Preferably located along normal paths of travel, including exits from an area.
- Unmarked exits
    - Exits and exit paths must be clearly marked and visible.
- No evacuation plan
    - An emergency action plan is required for most buildings.
    - The plan must include, among other things, known hazards/risks, evacuation procedures, and who to contact in an emergency.