



Monday, April 5, 1999

Avon employees wonder about future

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Greater Niagara Newspapers

ALBION – As the cloud of smoke rose from the burning shell of Avon Automotive Friday, employees gathered along East Avenue to watch firefighters battle the flames.

“It’s sad to see your job go,” said press operator Debra Tanner, standing in the K&K Food Mart parking lot.

The massive blaze collapsed the roof of the building and required 11 fire companies to extinguish. Reports said the fire began when workers were grinding a railing and sparks flew up into the wooden beams along the ceiling.

Tanner said the majority of workers had Good Friday off, but a crew of about 25 people volunteered to complete work that couldn’t be done with the pressroom staff there. The factory makes parts for automobiles.

Brigitte Hill was the cash register clerk at K&K when the first of the employees came out of the building.

“We looked out the back window and you could see it (the fire) was all on the roof,” Hill said. “In a matter of minutes, it all went up. The smoke was black, ebony black.”

Hill spoke with one of the men who had been working and said she was told employees had tried to put the fire out with fire extinguishers but failed when fumes became too much.

“The top of his shoes burned,” she said. “He had really tried to do something.”

Employees Annette Miller, Andrea Greer and Cornine Clark stood close to the yellow tape marking the fire scene off limits, wondering aloud how they will make their mortgages and car payments if their jobs are gone.

“It’s seriously going to affect us,” Miller said.

“Unemployment isn’t going to cut it,” Greer explained. “We have car payments, house payments.”

“Some couples, it’s all the income they have,” Miller added. “We’ve had layoffs, but nothing like this.”

Friday’s was not the first fire for the company, but it was the most extensive, Greer said. “We had a small explosion in the old building, but we were only out for three days.”

Clark said she also heard employees had tried to put the fire out before it spread.

“They thought they had it out,” she said. “But it was up in the ceiling, I guess, and it went up a pipe.”

Union Vice President Jimmy Pore was also on hand to talk with concerned employees.

“We’re waiting on a reply back from them (union officials),” he said. “I’m pretty sure they will help. Whatever we need at the time, I’m sure they’ll be willing to step in.”

Process Technician Scott Davis of Knowlesville was in the plant at the time of the fire, running tests on a new tool. He was told about the fire as he was leaving the front office, he said.

“We’re going to rebuild, there’s no doubt about that,” he said, adding Avon workers and administrators planned to meet this weekend for an informational meeting concerning the company’s future plans for the plant. “We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us and we’ll be back.”

The heavy smoke forced the evacuation of residents along East Avenue and Meadowbrook, temporarily displacing about 200 people. Red Cross workers from Orleans County set up a shelter at the Firemen’s Recreation Grounds on State Street. By evening, most residents had found other places to stay and only two families remained. However, a canteen line was formed for the many firefighters who had been on the scene.

“We had about 25 people here, initially,” Albion Disaster Relief Director Dave Albone said. “We provided them with some food and place to stay until we could get them on their way.”

Albone said the shelter was prepared for a major evacuation.

“The Red Cross does sheltering and safe havens all the time,” he said. “In this part of the country we really don’t have many disasters.”

Rochester Director of Emergency Services Becky McCorry said volunteers from Orleans and Monroe counties came to help at the shelter. She is the head of Zone No. 2 (Western New York) Disaster.

“What we try to do is give support,” she said. “We were prepared to come out here with the ERV from Rochester.”

The Emergency Response Vehicle (ERV) is prepared to be a mobile canteen, first aid station and command center. It remained on stand-by, McCorry said, while the shelter was open but was not called for.

Avon neighbor David Hucknell said he and his wife were the first residents brought to the shelter.

“We saw black smoke coming out,” Hucknell said. “Then some of the debris started falling on the house. These two guys came stumbling by. They said they had it under control and then it let loose. At the loading docks, the flames were shooting out.”

Avon moved to the new location about two years ago and remodeled the building, Hucknell said.

“They did such a nice job with that building,” he noted. “They had something nice going there.”