

Danger Above

A Tragic Death, An Epic Courtroom Battle

Robert Zausner

Chapter 3

For previous summer vacations, the Goretzkas—Mike, Carrie and their little girls, Chloe and Carlie—had rented a beach house at the shore in Rehoboth, Delaware, and invited the entire family to make the trip down from suburban Pittsburgh. Many of them came, packing the house with relatives, plenty of food and lots of fun.

But this once, Mike wanted to get away with just his wife and kids. It was actually his brother Chuck's idea. "Michael, you can't keep taking everybody. You've got to go somewhere yourselves," he'd said more than once.

So this year, 2009, Mike had booked a trip to Disney World for the first week of June. But then he changed the plans. Mike had found out that week was marked "Gay Days Orlando," a time in which more than 150,000 gay celebrants made the trip to the Florida city. Mike was no homophobe, but he felt that might not be the perfect atmosphere for his daughters, aged four and two. So he changed the trip to the end of May.

The family had a wonderful time, going on the rides and seeing the sights, eating junk food and staying at the Wilderness Lodge, a theme hotel on the Disney World grounds. "For the first time, you look at each other at the end of the day and you're alone. It was a great feeling. It really bonded us four," Mike remembered.

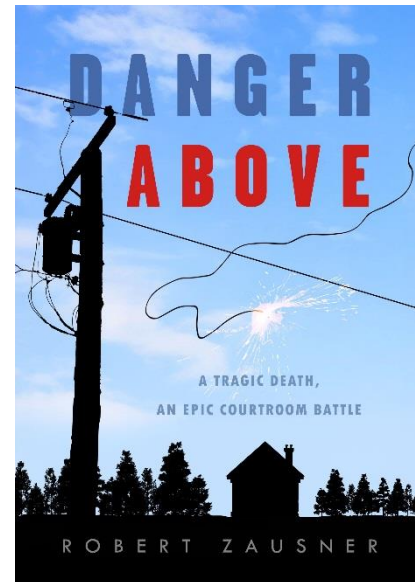
They were home by the first week of June. "Going earlier was my choice. We could have gone that first week in June. We could have been at Disney that week," Mike said years later. "It haunted me for a long time."

Chapter 4

JoAnn Goretzka and her two young grandchildren were watching at around four in the afternoon while their mother, Carrie, was cooking and talking on the kitchen phone. Then the power went off.

The adults looked out the dining room window into the backyard and saw flames coming from pine trees off in the distance. Carrie dialed the power company, but the land line had gone dead. So she went to get her cell phone from her car in the garage.

A few minutes went by, then a few more. JoAnn told the kids to stay inside, to sit on the carpeted steps of the split-level home while she went to check on their mother. She walked down to the front door, opened it and took a step onto the front porch. She saw Carrie and her breath caught in her throat. Her daughter-in-law was lying on her back on the strip of grass next to the driveway. She was on fire, flames coming from her abdomen, smoke rising



from her entire body. Carrie was entangled in a fallen power line. She was moaning. JoAnn didn't hesitate. She ran to Carrie. But as soon as she got to the grass and reached out, she was blown back by the force of the energized ground, her fingertips severely burned when she touched the lawn. Stunned, JoAnn did the only thing left that she could do. She screamed for help.

"Carrie! Carrie! Somebody has to help her! Somebody has to help her!"

All the while, Carrie lay feeble in the grass. Being shocked by a surging 7,200-volt line. Burning.

A neighbor, Don Thoma, chief of the local volunteer fire company, was home when he spotted smoke coming from between the two houses next to his. When he walked outside, he heard JoAnn's screams. He hurried to the Goretzka property and saw Carrie lying on the ground with the power line across her body. He edged closer but stopped in his tracks when he felt a tingle of electricity shoot up his leg. He stepped away.

Timothy Harper, another neighbor and also a volunteer fireman, arrived about the same time. He saw fire coming from Carrie's hip and smoke rising from her whole body. Thoma told Harper to run and get a fire extinguisher. Meanwhile, others had arrived at the property, but Harper shouted at them to stay back.

All the while, Carrie burned, moaning helplessly, unable to move.

Other neighbors came outside. So did Carrie's young daughters. Hearing their grandmother's screams, they sat crumpled on the porch, panicked looks on their faces as they watched their mother's anguish.

"Mommy! Mommy! Mommy is on fire! Mommy is on fire!"

Carrie remained immobile. Could she see them watching her?

Harper shouted at other neighbors who had arrived to stay back, that the wire was still "hot."

Mike Goretzka's next-door neighbor, Ron Molnar, who had been watching TV, stepped onto his porch in bare feet. He spotted Carrie and couldn't believe his eyes. "She looked like a mannequin," he would recall. "When I seen what I seen, it was like a movie. I was in shock. I just stood there."

Mike Thornburgh had been alarmed by a "huge ball of fire" that he saw rising between several houses as he was delivering mail around the corner. He heard the frantic shouts: "Help me! Help me!" He recognized JoAnn Goretzka's voice from his frequent rounds in the neighborhood. He hopped into his truck and gunned it. When he arrived at the Goretzkas', Thornburgh was horrified. He began to approach Carrie but was quickly shouted away by Harper. "He probably saved my life," Thornburgh would say later. But he felt awful. "We just stood there. We couldn't do nothing."

Then he noticed JoAnn and the girls huddled in a ball on the porch. He ran to them. He picked up one child and shouted Molnar out of his stupor—"C'mon, Ron!"—to grab the other. They tried to keep the children's faces turned away from their mother. They carried them into Molnar's house. "The kids were traumatized, they didn't say anything," Molnar would recount.

Michelle Siegel was gardening in her front yard a block away when she heard a sound “like a firecracker” and moments later heard the screams. She dropped her garden tool and ran toward the commotion. Mike Thornburgh whizzed by her in his mail truck. As she got closer to Carrie, she, too, was warned to stand back.

Carrie lay motionless, the power line holding her like an angry serpent, its venom coursing through her body. Harper doused Carrie with a fire extinguisher. He did it once, then, when the flames refused to go out, he sprayed it a second time.

Bernadine Collins, Mike’s neighbor on the other side of his house, went to her fence, staring in sorrow and disbelief. Other neighbors came to the scene and soon the whole neighborhood was there, watching. Helpless.

Now, Carrie was still. It was uncertain how much she was comprehending. But she was still conscious. Harper urged Carrie, “Hold still. Don’t move. Help’s coming.”

Collins, an older lady with short, curly white hair, stood, like everyone else, watching the terrible scene, unable to do anything for her neighbor and friend. “The only thing I heard was she was making a high, soft sound. Like a cat. It was a really pitiful sound.”

Emergency personnel and power company workers arrived minutes later. Finally, after about 20 minutes, the power was shut down and one man used a long, fiberglass “hot stick” to lift the power line off Carrie. MedVac helicopter pilot Mariann Holnaider would remember that when she came on the scene, Carrie was still awake, crying and in terrible pain. Her left arm was burned so badly that bone and tendons were visible.

EMT chief Walter Lipinski administered an IO, an intraosseous needle of a heavier gauge than an IV, which can penetrate into bone marrow. “I doubt anything could have stopped the pain,” he said. Eventually, 40 minutes after first being shocked by the power line, the drugs finally forced Carrie into unconsciousness.

Mike Goretzka, speeding home from work in his pickup truck, pushed his way through the neighbors and emergency workers. Seeing Carrie, he immediately knew she was in very bad shape. Mike started crying. Holnaider and Lipinski tried to comfort him, but they didn’t lie to him. It was serious.

There was no room for Mike Goretzka to travel with Carrie to the hospital. Before the helicopter took off, he kissed his wife good-bye.

Carrie Goretzka died three days later.