

## 67 How Not to Put Out a Fire

By David Cochran

I believe that many of the life's surprising experiences are foreshadowed, but they seem novel to us because we aren't perceptive enough to sense the clues when they present themselves. In this blog, I share a true story about an event that happened in East Blawenburg almost 40 years ago, illustrating how my intuition foreshadowed a memory-building event.



*This tranquil scene in the woods in East Blawenburg today belies the commotion surrounding a fire that occurred there years ago.*

It was dusk on a very hot and humid July 4th in the early 1980s. My wife, Evelyn, two daughters, Jenny and Andrea, and I sat in the backyard making idle conversation, swatting mosquitoes, and watching our neighbor's oldest son toss smoke bombs and firecrackers at his friends in their backyard and the woods behind it. I recognized that what they were doing was dangerous, but I was grateful that Roscoe (not his real name) had found something to do instead of shooting his BB gun at the windows of our tool shed.

I was uneasy about Roscoe's activities, and with hindsight, my intuition was right on target! When I looked into the future, the picture wasn't pretty. I knew the fireworks Roscoe and his friends were discharging was going to be a problem.

Roscoe's fireworks supply dwindled quickly, and the smoke and noise ended before total darkness set in. I sighed in relief when the dangerous merriment was over, and shortly thereafter, we went inside to the comfort of our air-conditioned recreation room.

Because of the extreme humidity, we decided to sleep in the rec room. Evelyn and I would sleep on the pull-out sofa and my seven- and three-year-olds would sleep at opposite ends of another sofa near the picture window facing the backyard. Our neurotic 10-year-old mutt, Roquefort (aka Rokie), added annoyance to our displaced sleeping arrangements by whining to get on our bed. We yielded and let him jump on the bed, where he promptly fell asleep and began snoring loudly. He was quickly moved back to the floor. The sound of those firecrackers must have lingered in his memory, because he continued to be restless and upset. This wasn't new behavior for him. In thunderstorms, we would often find him quivering behind the toilet.

Things were pretty uneventful after we finally settled in, that is, until about 2:00 a.m. In his anxious state, Rokie wanted to find a hiding place in the rec room, and he chose a snug spot between the wall below the picture window and the couch where Andrea and Jenny were sleeping. It didn't take long for him to realize that he was stuck. First, he whimpered, and we told him to be quiet. Then he whined, and we yelled at him. That had no effect at all! His whining increased until I had no alternative but to get out of bed and figure out what his problem was.

Groggily, I went over to where the girls were sleeping and carefully moved the couch forward a few inches. This freed the imprisoned pooch, who released some stored energy by running around the rec room erratically. As I lifted my head up from the couch, I noticed a glow coming through the curtain. I couldn't figure out why someone would be shining a light into the woods behind my neighbor's property. Then my mind snapped to attention and my heart started racing. I realized that my concern over those firecrackers was real.

I quickly pulled the curtain back to behold a bright, glowing mass in the woods that resembled a giant Coleman lantern. It was right where Roscoe had turned an old shipping crate, about the size of a refrigerator, into a clubhouse. I thought that the fire would quickly burn down, and the lantern glow would be history. Then I realized the flames were shooting up a stand of ash trees and widening on the leafy woodland floor.

Panic set in. What should I do? I was a high school vice principal, so I've seen things worse than this. Get rational, I commanded myself. That thought quickly fled, and I started running around like Rokie.

I first woke up Evelyn and yelled for her to call the fire company right away. Before she could fully comprehend what I said, I flung open the sliding glass door and was on my way to my neighbor's house bedecked in my shorty pjs.

Halfway across the yard, I started yelling for the neighbors in the darkened house to wake up. This was futile, because they couldn't possibly hear my cries over their noisy air conditioners. By the time I ran across their driveway, I had realization #1. I didn't have any shoes on, and their driveway was topped with 3/4 " quarry stones. Ouch! Bad move.

I hobbled across the drive, went onto their deck, and began pounding on their back door, but to no avail. I tore around the front of the house, cursing as my feet took further abuse in those driveway shards. I rang their front doorbell and yelled, hoping to get their attention. My confused neighbor finally stuck his head out the upstairs window, and I told him to come put out the fire. Not having any idea what I was talking about, he proceeded to ask questions.

"Get down here," I yelled. "The woods are on fire. Soon it will be the whole village."

Then it occurred to me. Maybe Roscoe was in his burning fort. I had realization #2. The neighbor would not be much help, so I would have to take things into my own hands. I'd better act fast to save Roscoe. I hobbled back across the driveway to get my garden hose just as the fire siren was awakening the entire village of Blawenburg. Phew! Help was on the way.

As I got to the hose, my youngest daughter, Andrea, was standing on the lawn pointing to the fire. I had left the sliding glass door open, unintentionally providing an easy exit for her. Rokie, still somewhat crazed from his encounter with the couch, was running around the yard, barking. I quickly grabbed the end of the garden hose and turned on the water. The nozzle contained the water until I would get to the fire. I figured I could at least keep the fire under control until the fire company arrived.

As I ran through the yard, I realized I couldn't see too well. The lantern in the woods didn't illuminate my yard enough to be of much help. Despite not seeing where I was going, I ran like a professional firefighter to the back of the yard, through the brambles, and into the woods, getting as close to the fire as I could. I turned on the nozzle, thinking that I would be the hero who saved Blawenburg. Nothing happened. I shook the nozzle and turned it to several settings, but no water came out.

Then I had realization #3. You can't stretch a 25-foot hose to reach 100 feet. I gave the hose a tug and more hose came toward me. Another tug, more hose. I turned back toward the house and could hear water running. Then I discovered Andrea standing right behind me in the woods. "Oh, no!" I yelled at her. "Go back to the house."

I still heard the water running, but nothing was coming out of my hose. I quickly concluded that in my exuberant effort to get water on the fire, I paid no attention to Andrea, and I didn't realize that I ripped the hose right off the faucet. I questioned my firefighting and parenting skills.



*Montgomery #2 Brush Truck 46*

At about that time, my neighbor, followed by Roscoe, came out of the house in their pjs. I sighed in relief, knowing that Roscoe was safe. Soon, Artie, the firefighter, pulled the brush truck to the back of my neighbor's driveway. The fire company was just a quarter-mile away, and Artie lived close to it.

I scooted Andrea back to the house and pointed Artie to the fire, as if he couldn't see where it was. He nodded, yawned, and unreeled a long, two-inch-wide hose that actually reached the fire. He turned the water on and quickly knocked the fire down, making sure it was out and the surrounding area was saturated. Artie called off the other engines, packed up his hose and gear, and told my neighbor that he needed to thank me for saving his house and the village. He was out of there in no time, leaving me beaming in the side yard for being recognized for my heroic efforts.

As I returned to the house, I had realization #4. You should never run through areas in the dark when you can't see where you're going. The thorny brambles added additional pain to my already aching feet. I felt the injuries from those thorns for days after the fire.

We eventually got the girls back to sleep and allowed the whimpering pooch to sleep with us, poking him throughout the night to stop his snoring. The adventure was over, and all was quiet in Blawenburg for the rest of the night.

Now that almost 40 years has passed, I still believe my original premise. We often have foreshadowing moments we can only understand after they happen. I subconsciously knew that those firecrackers would cause a problem. Indeed, they caused a big problem, but they also provided a lifelong memory for me and my family as well as a tale for the historical archives of Blawenburg.

**Notes:**

1. I wrote most of this tale in 1984 and updated it recently.
2. While we live in the same house, the neighbors mentioned in this story are not our current neighbors.



*The most recent addition to the MTVFC2 fleet.*

### **Interesting Facts**

1. Montgomery Township Volunteer Fire Company No. 2 in Blawenburg has been in operation in several locations for 75 years. See Blog 29 for more information about the fire company.
2. Montgomery Township Volunteer Fire Company No. 2 is also known as Somerset County Station 46.
3. Firefighter Artie Parsell served the local fire company for many years and was recently honored for his service. Thanks, Artie and to all the other volunteers who are on call to help when it is needed!

### **Sources**

### **Information**

Story by David Cochran

### **Pictures**

Woods in East Blawenburg—David Cochran

Montgomery Fire Company #2, Brush 46—<https://www.mtvfc2.com/apparatus.html>

Montgomery Fire Company #2 truck—<https://www.mtvfc2.com/>

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