

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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FIRE ON BOARD THE *ISLAND LADY*
PORT RICHEY, FLORIDA
JANUARY 14, 2018

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA18FM010

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Interview of: MICHELLE OTTINGER
Cage Cashier

Tuesday,
January 23, 2018

APPEARANCES:

CWO [REDACTED]
U.S. Coast Guard

[REDACTED]
Guard (Civilian)

BETH FIFER, Company Representative
Tropical Breeze Casino

STACY FALCONE, Company Representative
Tropical Breeze Casino

JAMES CARLSON, Attorney
Hamilton, Miller & Birthisel

I N D E X

ITEM

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Interview of Michelle Ottinger:

By CWO [REDACTED]

4

By Mr. [REDACTED]

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I N T E R V I E W

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CWO [REDACTED] -- and this is [REDACTED] [REDACTED] He's also with the U.S. Coast Guard. And we're going to ask you a couple questions today regarding the vessel fire. We're going to tape record this so we don't have to write everything down and we can listen to your answers. Okay?

INTERVIEW OF DEBRA BLOOM

BY CWO [REDACTED]

Q. Do you still live at [REDACTED] ?

A. No. I'm on [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Q. Okay. So to start off with, can you give me your background, your educational background, and your work background?

A. Graduated from Bible Baptist Christian Academy in Shady Hills. No criminal background. Work-wise, I used to work for the casino boat a million years ago, and been back like 2 years. And then I did a little bit of everything, tile, worked for the mall. Everything's always been administrative, accounting.

Q. Okay. And your position at SunCruz?

A. Cashier.

Q. Cashier.

A. And bar manager.

Q. Okay. And how long have you worked for SunCruz?

A. I have been back pushing 2 years now, I think.

Q. Approximately 2 years?

1 A. Yes.

2 Q. And always as a bartender cashier?

3 A. Always as a cashier.

4 Q. Okay, cashier. And so your previous employment with SunCruz,
5 how long was that for?

6 A. Well, I did quite a few years. I don't know. It was a long
7 time -- I was gone for about 8½ years. I had medical problems so
8 I stayed shore side.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. Just did local employment.

11 Q. Okay. So can you walk me through -- it was January 14th,
12 your workday?

13 A. Okay. I left the dock approximately 3:30. I was sitting
14 downstairs with a fellow cashier, Alesa, and noticed a little more
15 -- we get the white smoke off the back of the boat, which is
16 normal. It's the diesel, I guess. And I was getting ready to go
17 outside and smoke a cigarette, and we both kind of noticed it was
18 smoking a little bit more than it normally does, white smoke
19 though.

20 Q. Were you -- sorry to interrupt, but -- so were you in the
21 transom area?

22 A. We were -- so on that side of the boat.

23 Q. So on the port side?

24 A. Um-hum.

25 Q. Inside the vessel, though? You were within --

1 A. I was inside.

2 Q. Okay, great. So that would be -- do you have a name for this
3 space? I keep calling it the passenger --

4 A. It is. It's the passenger area.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. It's where all the passengers sit.

7 Q. All right. So from there you could see the engine exhaust?

8 A. Yes. On the outside of the boat.

9 Q. Could you tell if it was coming from the right side or
10 starboard side of the boat or the left side, port side?

11 A. It -- no, you couldn't tell. It wasn't coming inside. It
12 was just -- it was coming out the outside while I was smoking.
13 Smoking a little bit more than it normally did. So at that point
14 Alesa and I went upstairs to go smoke, and we had seen -- we told
15 Captain Mike, you know, it's smoking a little bit more, and he
16 said it looks like the engine's overheating.

17 So he was turning at that point, because I think he already
18 knew what was going on with the engine overheating because the
19 bell was going off in the bridge.

20 Q. So you could hear an alarm on the bridge?

21 A. Yes.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. And then we both stepped out.

24 Q. What did Captain Mike do at that point?

25 A. Captain Mike made the turn. He automatically just turned

1 back around. We were just past the stilt house on the left with
2 the red, white and blue American flag on it. And he proceeded to
3 start heading back towards the dock. And then he went downstairs
4 to check something. He had to maintain the course after he made
5 the turn. He just said stay on this, and then he went downstairs.
6 And then he came back up.

7 Q. Who did he have maintain --

8 A. Alesa.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. She just stood at the wheel and just held it where he had it
11 pointed.

12 Q. Were you in the pilothouse at this time?

13 A. No, I was standing on the outside smoking.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. And then he came back up and he said that it looked like it
16 was overheating so we were going to head back to the dock. And he
17 said to go get one of the deckhands. So I went downstairs and got
18 one of the deckhands, and at that point he went ahead and had
19 everybody evacuate to the top deck.

20 And he asked me to go check on the deckhands, because they
21 had the fire extinguishers just in case -- because I think -- I
22 wasn't there for like that conversation, but he just said, you
23 know, go relay a message, any one of the deckhands up here. So I
24 went down and said, hey, Captain Mike needs you upstairs. And I,
25 at that point, since all the customers were up top, I went out and

1 cleared the bathrooms to make sure nobody was in the bathrooms.

2 Q. Um-hum. Can you --

3 A. The bathrooms are right here.

4 Q. Okay. That's what I suspected. Okay. Could you see
5 anything when you cleared the bathrooms?

6 A. No.

7 Q. No?

8 A. Nothing.

9 Q. Smoke was the same?

10 A. Smoke, yeah, and it was still white smoke, and then it just,
11 within a matter of moments, you know, it went black smoke.

12 Q. I'm curious, do you know where the smoke was coming from?
13 Was it still coming from the exhaust ports or --

14 A. At this point --

15 Q. -- could it have been coming from the vent?

16 A. -- it was on the side. At that point the black -- because
17 the black smoke never -- I didn't see it on the left side.

18 Q. Um-hum.

19 A. The white smoke was coming out outside more. You know,
20 that's how I had noticed it. But when it went from white to
21 black, it was coming out this side.

22 Q. This vent right here?

23 A. Um-hum.

24 Q. Okay. So that's the starboard side, looks like engine room
25 vent? Okay.

1 A. And then, you know, from the time that I cleared the two
2 bathrooms and went back up the stairs, the flames were shooting up
3 on this side.

4 Q. Oh, wow.

5 A. So, and everybody was being exited to the front of the vessel
6 from the left side.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. So I couldn't get through there, so I went this way into the
9 bridge and across, because at that point they were already
10 starting to evacuate.

11 Q. Jump overboard?

12 A. They were starting to bring them down to -- the front of the
13 boat has a staircase or steps, and they were bringing them down to
14 the front to start the evacuation. So from there, when I cut
15 across, they already had majority of them off and the only people
16 that were up top -- Captain Mike was coming back up from down,
17 because he was unloading passengers. John Crowe, and two young
18 boys, two young passengers, they were going down the stairs. And
19 I lost track of John Crowe at that point because I was on the
20 first to second step when I felt the heat from the glass behind
21 me. So I just kind of -- I jumped over the railing onto the bob
22 and tack. And then from there I exited off that left passenger
23 side because it was open.

24 Q. At the transfer port?

25 A. Um-hum.

1 Q. Okay. So you were on the upper deck, the open deck.

2 A. Um-hum.

3 Q. And then you, like, climbed over the rail and then jumped
4 down to the main deck?

5 A. The arm railing that you would hang onto to go down the
6 steps --

7 Q. Yes?

8 A. -- I was stepping onto the second step and I just jumped over
9 the arm rail.

10 Q. So you like hopped it?

11 A. Yeah, I hopped it.

12 Q. Okay. Do you remember who went in front of you into the
13 water or who was behind you? Do you recall an order?

14 A. I know they were exiting -- I know Izzy went off the side,
15 the left side that I jumped off of. I believe John Crowe came
16 from above. I assisted a customer into the water by kicking him
17 into the water, because he was in the left door space and he
18 wasn't jumping.

19 Q. He wouldn't move?

20 A. He wouldn't move. So I kind of kicked him into the water and
21 I jumped over him. I was the last person off that left side.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. He kind of went off at the same time. So --

24 Q. How deep was the water?

25 A. Waist deep.

1 Q. Waist deep, okay. Did you suffer any injuries or --

2 A. Minor bruises.

3 Q. Did you ever hear instructions from the crew on what was
4 going on or --

5 A. Just that they were -- they had everybody in a single line to
6 exit them off the front, and it was -- they were very organized,
7 which was awesome, you know. Very organized, keeping everybody
8 calm. They talked them through everything. They were lowering
9 people down, you know. I know one of the deckhands got in the
10 water and they were lowering down literally to him, and then
11 that's how they were -- they had a really good system and reeled
12 them down from either the left or from that front side.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. Because the flames were coming from the right side, more so.

15 Q. Okay. So I'm going to shift a little bit. So what are your
16 duties and responsibilities on the *Tropic Breeze*?

17 A. Open and close, balancing, cashiering. Just all money and
18 numbers and slot checking. I work on machines.

19 Q. Oh, you work on machines too? Okay. In the event of
20 emergency, what would you do?

21 A. I always clear bathrooms. It's always to assist from the
22 cashier space to help clear all the way out to wherever they've
23 been instructed to depart the vessel.

24 Q. That's an important job, though, clearing bathrooms and
25 making sure the guests know where to go.

1 A. Um-hum.

2 Q. And training, did you have firefighting or abandon ship
3 training?

4 A. No. I have -- I scuba drive, so I've been through CPR
5 certification and rescue diving. So --

6 Q. Do you recall the last drill that you performed that you were
7 a part of?

8 A. No.

9 Q. Okay. In the 2 years, do you ever recall a drill?

10 A. I know the deckhands do them, but the cashiers I haven't.
11 But it's in my protocol to check bathrooms.

12 Q. And do you wear a uniform?

13 A. I do.

14 Q. Can you describe it?

15 A. I wear black pants, black socks -- well, sometimes black
16 socks -- black shoes and a black button-up shirt.

17 Q. Okay. Did you ever take any photos or videos that day?

18 A. No.

19 Q. None? Okay.

20 In your experience have you ever gotten on either the *Tropic*
21 *Breeze* or the *Island Lady* and started to make a trip out and then
22 had to turn around due to a casualty or --

23 A. I know we had something stuck in the propellers once and we
24 had to --

25 Q. Were you on board for that?

1 A. Um-hum.

2 Q. Do you recall when that was?

3 A. Three weeks, 2 weeks -- 2, 3 weeks ago. A scuba diver went
4 in, got something out and we were back on the water by 7.

5 Q. Do you recall who the captain of the boat was?

6 A. I want to say it was Captain Willie.

7 Q. Captain Willie? And do you recall what boat it was?

8 A. Yes, it was the *Tropical Breeze*.

9 Q. Okay.

10 CWO [REDACTED] You got something, [REDACTED]?

11 BY MR. [REDACTED]

12 Q. When was the first time you saw the smoke?

13 A. I wouldn't know time. I would just know like where we were
14 at.

15 Q. Whereabouts?

16 A. Probably right around -- it was past Durney Key. So between
17 Durney Key and the stilt house.

18 Q. When you first saw it, what color was it?

19 A. White.

20 Q. Do you know where the engine room is located on the vessel?

21 A. Below.

22 Q. I have to phrase that question better. That's the second
23 time that I got that answer. Let me ask this. Have you been
24 inside of the engine room?

25 A. No.

1 Q. Do you know how to get in there?

2 A. I know how they would get in there, but --

3 Q. Have you ever seen anybody going in there?

4 A. I've seen the captain and I have seen deckhands.

5 Q. On the day of the accident did you see anybody going into the
6 engine room?

7 A. I saw two deckhands. One was getting ready to go into it.

8 Q. Do you remember their names?

9 A. I think Shawn was standing near there and Tyler was in there.
10 He wasn't in the -- it didn't look like he was going down, but I
11 think Jon was going down there. He had the fire extinguisher in
12 his hand.

13 Q. You mean Shawn?

14 A. Jon, J-o-n. He was tying a bandana around his mouth. But
15 nobody was actually in it yet.

16 Q. Were you injured?

17 A. Just bumps and bruises from departing the vessel or dragging
18 Harold, one of the other -- just bruises on the left side.

19 Q. So one point you said Mike -- Captain Mike said the vessel
20 was overheating and told you to get a deckhand. Do you remember
21 which deckhand you got?

22 A. No. No, I just -- they were standing together so I just said
23 Captain Mike needs one of you upstairs.

24 Q. When you got underway on the vessel was there any
25 announcements about -- to any of the passengers or anything?

1 A. They do a departure announcement: Welcome to the *Island*
2 *Lady*, and it explains where life jackets are located and the
3 lockers and -- I should have it memorized, but --

4 Q. Is that recorded or --

5 A. No. They announce it every single time.

6 Q. Do you know who made the announcement?

7 A. One of the deckhands.

8 MR. [REDACTED] Mr. Carlson, do you have any questions, sir?

9 MR. CARLSON: I'm Jim Carlson. I'm Port Richey Casino's
10 attorney, and they're a party in interest, so that's why I'm here
11 to assist in the investigation. But no, I do not have any
12 questions. Thank you.

13 CWO [REDACTED] Thanks for your time. Appreciate it.

14 MR. [REDACTED] Thank you.

15 MS. OTTINGER: Yeah.

16 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

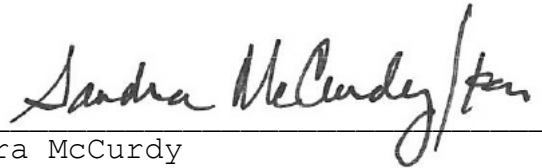
IN THE MATTER OF: FIRE ON BOARD THE *ISLAND LADY*
 PORT RICHEY, FLORIDA
 JANUARY 14, 2018
 Interview Michelle Ottinger

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA18FM010

PLACE:

DATE: January 23, 2018

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.



Sandra McCurdy
Transcriber