

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

\* \* \* \* \*

Investigation of: \*

\*

NATURAL GAS BUILDING EXPLOSION & \*

FIRE NEAR WEST READING, \*

Accident No.: PLD23LR002

PENNSYLVANIA, ON MARCH 24, 2023 \*

\*

\* \* \* \* \*

Interview of: DANNY VOORHIES, Detective  
West Reading Police Department

West Reading Police Department  
500 Chestnut Street  
West Reading, Pennsylvania

Wednesday,  
March 29, 2023

## APPEARANCES:

SHERYL HARLEY, Investigator  
National Transportation Safety Board

ASHLEY HORTON, Accident Investigator  
Department of Transportation  
Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration

Terri Cooper-Smith, Supervisor  
Southeast Area for Pipeline Safety  
Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission

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I N T E R V I E W

(1:16 p.m.)

1  
2  
3 MS. HARLEY: Okay. Good afternoon. My name is Sheryl  
4 Harley. I'm an investigator with the Office of Railroad, Pipeline  
5 and Hazardous Material for the National Transportation Safety  
6 Board.

7 And today's date is March 29th of 2023. It is 1:16 p.m., and  
8 am located at the West Reading Police Department located at 500  
9 Chestnut Street in West Reading, Pennsylvania.

10 And with me, I'm going to ask first my colleagues to  
11 introduce themselves.

12 MS. HORTON: Ashley Horton, accident investigator, with the  
13 Department of Transportation, Pipeline and Hazardous Materials  
14 Safety Administration.

15 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Terri Cooper-Smith, supervisor of the  
16 Southeast Area for the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission's  
17 Pipeline Safety Division.

18 MS. HARLEY: And today we are here with investigator or  
19 detective?

20 DET. VOORHIES: Detective Danny Voorhies, D-a-n-n-y, last  
21 name is V-o-o-r-h-i-e-s.

## INTERVIEW OF DANNY VOORHIES

22  
23 BY MS. HARLEY:

24 Q. Okay. And, Detective, as you know, we are here to talk about  
25 the pipeline explosion that occurred at the Parker --

1 A. Palmer.

2 Q. I'm sorry. Palmer Factory located at 17 South 2nd Street, in  
3 West Reading, and that occurred on Friday at approximately 4:50 --

4 A. Yep.

5 Q. -- p.m. Okay. So why don't you go ahead and just kind of  
6 walk me through --

7 A. Okay.

8 Q. -- what you know about that.

9 A. So on that day, I was working. My shift was done at 6  
10 o'clock. Around 5 o'clock, I was in the office, located at 500  
11 Chestnut Street in West Reading. It's approximately four to five  
12 blocks away from the explosion site. When I was here, I heard a  
13 boom and the building shook. At 2 to 3 minutes later, the  
14 dispatch went out from Berks Radio that there was a fire at the  
15 Palmer Building. Additional information came in that there was an  
16 explosion and a full building collapse.

17 At that point, I got in the car. I went over to the  
18 location. I parked right on the corner at 2nd and Franklin  
19 Street. When I got out, I saw that there was a fire. There was  
20 already some fire department personnel on scene, and there were  
21 several people down in the street.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. I felt poorly (ph.). I went over. I started to assess the  
24 patients. I saw that there were two males that had been -- well,  
25 first, I'll say, the Palmer Candy Company is located on the east

1 side of the street. There were two male victims that had been  
2 blown across the street, and they were in the west side walk, west  
3 parking lot which was across the street from the candy company.  
4 There was one body that was in the street that had been covered up  
5 with a shirt. There was another female who was later identified I  
6 believe as Amy Sandoval. I believe that's her name. Amy Sandoe.  
7 She was partially in the rubble, partially not, but it was very  
8 clear that she was deceased. Then there was another victim that  
9 was in between Building 2 which is the building where the  
10 explosion happened and Building 1. There's an alleyway separates  
11 those two buildings. It's Cherry Street. That male was later  
12 identified as Mark Baxter. He was in the process of being  
13 extricated from the rubble.

14 At that point, there was enough fire personnel on the scene,  
15 a large crowd started to form. Everyone that was on location was  
16 being treated by medical personnel. I then left and took command  
17 of the scene and started to direct other law enforcement officer  
18 and other people that were coming into the scene.

19 As that was going on, we began to block off traffic, began to  
20 shut streets down so that we could push the crowd back. We pushed  
21 the crowd back two blocks in every direction so that fire had  
22 enough space to work.

23 Once more police personnel got on scene, a command post was  
24 set up. The chief of police arrived. He took over incident  
25 command, and then I took over running what was going on on the

1 scene.

2 So at that point, we didn't know who was in the building  
3 after the collapse. So myself and an officer from Bern Township  
4 Police. His name is Josh, J-o-s-h, last name is Santos, S-a-n-t-  
5 o-s. Officer Santos and I broke up into two groups. He went down  
6 to 2nd and Chestnut Street, and I went up to 3rd and Franklin.  
7 Now, those two locations were where most of the bystanders were  
8 watching, but it's also where most of the Palmer employees had  
9 gathered.

10 I specifically talked to -- I don't know her name, but it was  
11 a white female, wearing a white coat. She was the shift  
12 supervisor that day, and there was another gentleman, I believe  
13 his name was Mark. He's one of the heads for Palmer. I contacted  
14 them early on, and I said, hey, go up to the Brewer's parking lot  
15 and stay there. I will be up to meet you, but I need you to stay  
16 there because there was a lot going on, and you're going to be my  
17 persons to contact. Stay there so I know where you are.

18 So I went up, I grabbed the supervisor and I grabbed Mark,  
19 and I said we need to do a roll call of who's accounted for and  
20 who's not. So I relayed that to Josh who then collected all the  
21 Palmer employees and we moved to the safe location of the Palmer  
22 parking lot which was at 1st Avenue and Chestnut Street. It was  
23 over a block from the actual explosion site.

24 The shift supervisor, she had a basically a roll call sheet.  
25 So when we were coming over, I need all of you to break into

1 whatever your unit is or whatever your shift assignment was for  
2 the day, so we can do a roll call. Palmer facilitated that.  
3 Everybody broke into their assignments, and then we took an  
4 inventory and a roll call, and that's when we started to figure  
5 out who was unaccounted for, who had been transported to the  
6 hospital.

7 That originally came out with the following people were  
8 unaccounted for. It was Mike Breedy, Judith Lopez, Domingo Cruz,  
9 Diana Cedenno, Patricia Borges.

10 Q. Okay. B-o-r.

11 A. I'm going to butcher that name, Xiorky Nunez, Sue Halvonik  
12 and Amy Sandoe. Now, those were the people that were unaccounted  
13 for and presumably trapped inside of the building. There were  
14 three individuals that were transported to Reading Hospital that  
15 were also employees of Palmer. Those three individuals were  
16 Zamora Davinia (ph.), and Elias Morales and Mark Baxter.

17 Now, referring back to my beginning statement, the  
18 individuals that were wounded when we first arrived, they were  
19 Zamora Davinia. She was the one, she was covered with a shirt.  
20 She actually I believe was not deceased, but someone from Palmer  
21 had covered her because her face was very badly disfigured, and  
22 they presumed that she was dead. She was later air lifted to  
23 Lehigh Valley Hospital.

24 Elias Morales, he was working in Building 2 at the time of  
25 the explosion. However, he had come -- he had smelled gas inside



1 the building and when he came down, because as he said, his eyes  
2 were burning and he started to get a headache, so he came out to  
3 get some fresh air. So when the building exploded, he was one of  
4 the gentlemen that was thrown across the street that I referenced  
5 earlier.

6 And then Mark Baxter, he was there. He is a truck driver.  
7 He was there delivering something to Palmer. I don't know what he  
8 was delivering. He was in the alleyway that I mentioned earlier  
9 background Building 2 and Building 1 at the time of the explosion.  
10 He was pushed forward onto almost the sidewalk. He was the  
11 gentleman that fire was actively digging out when I got there.

12 Then there were other people that were not Palmer employees  
13 that had been transported to the hospital for different issues as  
14 well. There was an Xavius Eshelman (ph.), and there was a mother  
15 and a son. Stephanie Baker is the mother, and Brent Baker was her  
16 7-year-old son. Their injuries were very minor. I believe they  
17 were just like some smoke inhalation, and I think they were just  
18 overwhelmed with what was going on. So they were transported just  
19 as a precaution. That's my understanding.

20 At that point, the scene was just maintained and held until  
21 fire could put enough water until they felt that it was safe for  
22 them to start going through, to start their recovery efforts for  
23 the people that were trapped inside.

24 Q. Okay. All right.

25 A. And that's everything for that night.

1 Q. Okay. All right. I'm just going to go back on a few things.  
2 I just want to --  
3 A. Sure.  
4 Q. A couple of things. You were talking about your dispatch.  
5 A. Yes.  
6 Q. And I guess what I didn't understand is what did you call  
7 your dispatch?  
8 A. Berks Radio.  
9 Q. Berks Radio.  
10 A. Berks Radio, yes.  
11 Q. Okay. Okay. All right. Second of all, Josh Santos --  
12 A. Okay.  
13 Q. -- the other officer, he's from what department?  
14 A. Bern Township Police Department.  
15 Q. Bern Township.  
16 A. B-e-r-n Township.  
17 Q. Oh, Bern --  
18 A. Bern, yep.  
19 Q. -- Township.  
20 A. They're located on 183 which is not far from here.  
21 Q. On 183.  
22 A. Yep, Route 183.  
23 Q. Great. Okay.  
24 A. I can give you his phone number, too. I also have that.  
25 Q. Awesome. Let's see. So, we've identified -- okay. So we've

1 identified the -- the driver of the truck, when you said that they  
2 were digging him out, was he inside the truck or outside the truck  
3 at the time of the explosion? Do you know?

4 A. He was outside of the truck.

5 Q. He was outside.

6 A. Yes. He had come over to make a delivery. So I'm thinking  
7 of how to say it, so when you go back and listen to it, it's clear  
8 for you. So, Building 1 and Building 2, as I mentioned before,  
9 they're on the east sidewalk, okay. Cherry Street runs east and  
10 west between those two buildings. Mr. Baxter's truck was parked  
11 to the rear of Building 2. Okay. He had got out of his truck,  
12 and he walked west towards 2nd Street, and when he walked there,  
13 he actually had come into contact with some of the Palmer  
14 employees, and he was going back to his truck, I guess to unload  
15 or do whatever he had to do, and he was halfway between 2nd Street  
16 and his truck when the explosion happened. And then for whatever  
17 reason, the force of the explosion pushed him west away from his  
18 truck back towards the sidewalk, and then that's when the building  
19 came down on top of him.

20 Q. Okay. All right. Did you have a chance to speak with him at  
21 all?

22 A. I did.

23 Q. Okay. Did he tell you that prior to this, was there any  
24 warning? Did he say anything about outside of the fact that he  
25 was walking back to his truck?

1 A. He did. He said that he, Mike Breedy and the deceased female  
2 were outside. They had noticed natural gas coming from the meter.  
3 They went to go inside to tell everyone to leave, and then he went  
4 back to his truck.

5 Q. Okay. Did he -- go ahead.

6 BY MS. COOPER-SMITH:

7 Q. So, Mike Breedy and the deceased female told him that they  
8 noticed natural gas coming out of which meter?

9 A. I don't have exactly which one.

10 Q. He just said a meter. And then he walked back towards his  
11 truck.

12 A. Correct.

13 Q. And then the explosion happened. Okay. I have one other  
14 question.

15 A. Um-hum.

16 Q. Originally you said there were two male victims in the  
17 parking lot across the street.

18 A. Um-hum.

19 Q. One of them was --

20 A. Elias Morales.

21 Q. Elias Morales, right.

22 A. Yes.

23 Q. Do we know who the other one was?

24 A. I do not know.

25 Q. Okay.

1 BY MS. HARLEY:

2 Q. So actually I want to go back to Mr. Morales. So, Mr.  
3 Morales was the one that said that he was inside Building 2 --

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. -- at the time.

6 A. Correct.

7 Q. And that he smelled gas.

8 A. Um-hum.

9 Q. And his eyes were burning, and he walked out of the building.

10 A. Correct.

11 Q. Okay. Did he tell you that he called 911, he notified the  
12 supervisor, or notified anybody about the gas?

13 A. I'm going to hold off on the interview that I conducted with  
14 him after. Everything that I'm telling you is what we knew the  
15 night of Friday.

16 Q. Okay. Understood. Okay. The other thing is Mr. Eshelman,  
17 Stephanie and Brent Baker, were they the occupants of the  
18 apartment building?

19 A. No.

20 Q. They were not the occupants.

21 A. No. I don't know about Eshelman. I know that the Bakers  
22 were just bystanders that came to help.

23 Q. I'm sorry.

24 A. The mother --

25 Q. The mother and her 7-year-old child.

1 A. Correct.

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. They heard it. They came down to help.

4 Q. Okay. All right.

5 MS. HARLEY: Okay. Ashley, did you have a question you'd  
6 like to add?

7 BY MS. HORTON:

8 Q. The Palmer employees, do you know their job titles?

9 A. I don't, but I know that they have -- so if -- I'm not sure  
10 we'll be able to do this, but if you guys would need, they have  
11 their assignment sheet for the day. Their roll call sheet is  
12 detailed, and it will have what each of them did throughout the  
13 day, whether -- I don't know what specifically it means, but I did  
14 see the sheet, and they have what unit they're in and what  
15 specifically they're doing each day.

16 Q. Gotcha.

17 A. But I don't know.

18 Q. Can you describe I guess the fire when you showed up?

19 A. So, yeah. When I got there, the fire was already going. It  
20 was a large scale fire. It was an active working fire. It was --  
21 everything that could be burning was burning from what I could  
22 see.

23 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Would you describe the fire as raging?  
24 Would you describe it as being fueled or was it just --

25 DET. VOORHIES: Yeah. I'm a cop. I'm not a fireman.

1 MS. COOPER-SMITH: No, no, I --

2 DET. VOORHIES: So that I don't, I don't know. I wouldn't  
3 know the difference between both of them.

4 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Would you -- did you hear anything as you  
5 saw the fire? Did you hear --

6 DET. VOORHIES: I didn't hear anything. That doesn't mean  
7 anything wasn't present but that wasn't my main focus.

8 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Right, I got you.

9 DET. VOORHIES: So I don't know.

10 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Okay.

11 BY MS. HARLEY:

12 Q. So here's my question. Did you smell anything?

13 A. I personally did not, but again I wasn't -- I didn't get  
14 close -- like I was up on the building but once I knew that fire  
15 was there, you know, my job is then the people that are there to  
16 provide medical care are there. My job's to get everyone back to  
17 give them room so they can work.

18 Q. So you said there was some fire department personnel already  
19 there. Can you identify the fire -- at least the fire companies  
20 or --

21 A. I know that Reading City Fire was there. I believe that just  
22 from where the trucks and apparatuses were, they probably first on  
23 scene.

24 Q. So what was there from Reading City as far as apparatus?

25 A. You're going to make me sound like an idiot. All fire trucks

1 are the same to me.

2 Q. Okay. All right. We'll do it this way. Was there an EMS  
3 ambulance unit on the scene?

4 A. There were ambulances all over the place.

5 Q. There were ambulances already there?

6 A. Yeah.

7 Q. Okay. Can you real quick describe how communications -- do  
8 you have a separate communications from the fire department or is  
9 it the same?

10 A. So we have separate. What ends up happening is once you  
11 start to tie up the air and Berks Radio realizes that it's going  
12 to be a prolonged situation, we are -- West Reading operates on  
13 Berks Dispatch A. We then switch over to Law Ops South 1. And  
14 then all communication then goes through that. And then incident  
15 command is set up and then they have their respective heads of  
16 everything in that. So you have police, fire, EMS, fire police,  
17 they all coordinate together.

18 Q. Okay. All right.

19 MS. HORTON: So were you the initial incident commander and  
20 then someone took over, right?

21 DET. VOORHIES: Yes.

22 BY MS. HARLEY:

23 Q. And just for the record, you said that was the chief?

24 A. The chief took over, yes.

25 Q. Okay. And his name?



1 A. Wayne Holben.

2 MS. HORTON: Was that the --

3 MS. HARLEY: Yes.

4 DET. VOORHIES: Yes.

5 BY MS. HARLEY:

6 Q. And just for the record, Holben is spelled H-o-l-b-e-n.

7 A. Correct.

8 Q. Okay. All right. Let's see. And you said Zamora was the,  
9 was the female that was in the middle of the street, her face was  
10 covered but she was not deceased. And, she was the one that was  
11 flown to the shock trauma unit?

12 A. To Lehigh Valley.

13 Q. To Lehigh Valley.

14 A. Correct.

15 Q. Okay. Are you aware at this particular point who is still in  
16 the hospital?

17 A. Yes.

18 Q. Do you have any idea?

19 A. No, I know.

20 Q. Okay.

21 A. Outside of Friday night.

22 Q. Okay. All right. Good enough. Let's see.

23 MS. HARLEY: Ladies, anyone else while I'm checking?

24 BY MS. COOPER-SMITH:

25 Q. I just need a clarification on the truck driver.

1 A. Um-hum.

2 Q. After someone told him that he -- that they smelled gas, he  
3 started walking back towards the truck, right?

4 A. Correct.

5 Q. And where was he found?

6 A. He was found closer to the sidewalk, in front of Building 2.

7 Q. In front of -- even though he was walking down Cherry Street?

8 A. I mean I can show you there. I mean it won't help in the  
9 recording, but if you want to better understand it, I can show  
10 you.

11 Q. Yeah, no, no, I want to make sure on the recording that --

12 A. Yeah.

13 Q. -- they can hear. So if he's walking back towards --

14 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Excuse me, again. The chief's in  
15 here. He's got stuff he's got to do, too. So can he come back  
16 some other time or is going to be soon or --

17 MS. HARLEY: It'll be soon probably.

18 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Soon.

19 MS. HARLEY: Yeah.

20 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Okay. All right.

21 MS. HARLEY: Thank you, sir.

22 BY MS. COOPER-SMITH:

23 Q. So he's walking back towards his truck back down Cherry  
24 Street but he's found in the front --

25 A. Correct.

1 Q. -- of Building 2.

2 A. Yes. He's walking away --

3 Q. Away.

4 A. -- from the street --

5 Q. Right.

6 A. -- but after the explosion, he is located closer to the  
7 street --

8 Q. Right.

9 A. -- and he is closer to his truck.

10 Q. Okay. Is he on what side of 2nd Street?

11 A. He is on -- he's still on the same side --

12 Q. Oh, the same side.

13 A. -- as the building. Yes.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. He does not go fully across the street.

16 Q. Okay. Gotcha.

17 A. He's located in between Building 1 and Building 2.

18 Q. In between Building 1 and Building 2, got it. Okay.

19 BY MS. HARLEY:

20 Q. So one thing you did say is that Mr. Mike Breedy --

21 A. Um-hum.

22 Q. -- and one of the deceased females had gone into report. Do  
23 you know if they were going into Building 1 or Building 2?

24 A. They went into Building 2 because they were, they were found  
25 deceased.

1 Q. Okay. All right. Let me see. Let's see --

2 MS. HORTON: Can you --

3 MS. HARLEY: I'm sorry. One other thing real quick.

4 BY MS. HARLEY:

5 Q. And you said you don't know who Mr. Eshelman is?

6 A. Correct.

7 MS. HARLEY: Okay. Go ahead, Ashley.

8 MS. HORTON: Do you know where they smelled gas? Were they  
9 coming from Building 1 to warn Building 2 or --

10 DET. VOORHIES: So, I'm giving you what I knew the night of.

11 MS. HORTON: Yeah.

12 DET. VOORHIES: Not anything after.

13 MS. HARLEY: Not anything after.

14 DET. VOORHIES: That, that has been elaborated on since, but  
15 that's what we've known Friday night, yeah, up until the time when  
16 I went home later that night.

17 MS. COOPER-SMITH: And those two individuals are deceased  
18 now, Breedy --

19 DET. VOORHIES: And Amy, yes.

20 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Amy Sandoe.

21 DET. VOORHIES: Sandoe.

22 MS. HARLEY: Sandoe.

23 DET. VOORHIES: Correct, they both are deceased, yes.

24 BY MS. HARLEY:

25 Q. Okay. Can you tell me how long it took them to extinguish

1 the fire approximately?

2 A. That I don't know.

3 Q. Okay. Do you think you were there for a period of time  
4 before they did or did it take them a couple of hours or --

5 A. That, that I don't know.

6 Q. Okay. Okay.

7 MS. HORTON: One thing. When did you leave the site for the  
8 night? Like how did you get I guess --

9 DET. VOORHIES: Relieved.

10 MS. HORTON: -- designated -- yeah.

11 DET. VOORHIES: I left a little after midnight.

12 BY MS. HARLEY:

13 Q. Was the fire still burning after midnight?

14 A. I don't believe so.

15 Q. Okay.

16 MS. HORTON: Did someone relieve you or your job was done --

17 DET. VOORHIES: No, my job was done for the night, and I was  
18 back in at 7 a.m. the next day.

19 MS. HORTON: Okay.

20 BY MS. COOPER-SMITH:

21 Q. Do you not have any individuals or -- you said that the  
22 employees went to the parking lot?

23 A. Um-hum.

24 Q. Do you know how many of them were -- were all those people  
25 from Building 1?

1 A. No.

2 Q. Oh, they were not?

3 A. No.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. Yeah, no. Building -- my understanding of it is, and I don't  
6 have full intricate knowledge of how Palmer Candy's set up.

7 Q. Um-hum.

8 A. I know that they do some manufacturing of chocolate in  
9 Building 2.

10 Q. Um-hum.

11 A. But Building 1, and you guys were down there, it is a bigger  
12 structure, I mean four floors.

13 Q. Right.

14 A. So that's where I believe the majority of the people were.

15 Q. Okay.

16 BY MS. HARLEY:

17 Q. Okay. Out of curiosity, do you know how many people were in  
18 Building 2 at the time?

19 A. I do not.

20 Q. Okay. All right. And, are you aware of anyone in Building 1  
21 being injured as a result of the blast?

22 A. I am not.

23 MS. HARLEY: Okay. I don't have any. Terri?

24 MS. COOPER-SMITH: No, I'm good.

25 MS. HARLEY: Ashley?

1 MS. HORTON: I think I'm good for now. Do you have a card?

2 DET. VOORHIES: I do, yeah. I'll get one for you.

3 MS. HORTON: Thanks.

4 BY MS. HARLEY:

5 Q. And so I always say this at the end. Is there anything you  
6 think that I should have asked you or we should have asked you and  
7 that we failed to ask you?

8 A. No, no, I think we went over in as good of detail as I can.  
9 I hope it's good enough for when you're listening back to  
10 understand it, but yeah.

11 Q. Is there anything else that you want to add or any other  
12 statement you want to make?

13 A. No, not right now.

14 Q. Okay. Great. All right. Well, I'm going to thank you very  
15 much for helping out, and again we will make these interviews also  
16 available to you and also to your chief as well.

17 A. Great.

18 MS. HARLEY: So I'm going to end the interview at 1:43 p.m.  
19 Thank you very much.

20 (Whereupon, at 1:43 p.m., the interview was concluded.)  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

CERTIFICATE

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


IN THE MATTER OF:           NATURAL GAS BUILDING EXPLOSION &  
                                  FIRE NEAR WEST READING,  
                                  PENNSYLVANIA, ON MARCH 24, 2023  
                                  Interview of Danny Voorhies

ACCIDENT NO.:                PLD23LR002

PLACE:                         West Reading, Pennsylvania

DATE:                         March 29, 2023

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.

  
Kathryn A. Mirfin  
Transcriber