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## Club Workers Say Soundproofing Insulation Was Donated

By PAUL von ZIELBAUER

**W**EST WARWICK, R.I., Feb. 26 — Employees of the nightclub where 97 people were killed in a fast-moving fire last week said that the soundproofing foam insulation around the club's stage had been donated in 2000 by a neighbor who worked at a company that sold acoustic insulation and that once

Kevin Beese, the manager of the Station, a popular live-music club that took just minutes to burn to the ground, said the foam covered the walls surrounding the stage where a band set off a pyrotechnic display. The fireworks soon had the insulation, and then the rest of the club, ablaze.

Mr. Beese, of Coventry, R.I., and other club employees also said the donated foam was patched to the walls with a common aerosol glue, which fire-safety experts say could have acted as an accelerant for the fire.

Six days after the fourth-deadliest nightclub fire in the nation's history, state and federal investigators here have become intensely interested in the kind of foam insulation that employees installed about 18 months ago to mollify neighbors who complained about loud music.

Investigators, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they suspect that the club may not have used the flame-retardant professional soundproofing required by Rhode Island's fire-safety laws, but a cheaper urethane-based foam that did not include fire-suppressing chemicals.

The state fire marshal has said the fire destroyed the club with unusual speed.

Most of those killed in the blaze were unable to escape the building before being overcome by smoke or succumbing to flames, state officials said.

Robert Solomon, a fire-safety expert at the National Fire Protection Association, a nonprofit research organization, said the fire's rapid movement, captured on videotape by a cameraman inside the club, leaves little doubt that the club was unsafe.

"From what I see in the TV footage, there is some material there that just burns at an unbelievable rate," said Mr. Solomon, whose organization's safety regulations are used by cities and towns across the country.

Depending on its intended use, urethane foam can burn very quickly, fire experts said. State investigators have recovered samples of the foam from the patch of blackened earth where the club once stood. They are testing the foam to determine its type and, possibly, its manufacturer. The tests are not yet complete.

Joe Barber, 30, a frequent patron of the club who said he also worked there part-time, said today that once the showers of sparks from the band's pyrotechnic display began hitting the foam, the flames quickly shot through the material.

"Once it started, it kept moving, about a foot a second," he said.

Mr. Beese and other club employees interviewed today, including the former manager who installed the foam on the club's walls, said they could not recall the name of the neighbor who donated the foam. The Rhode Island attorney general's office, the state fire marshal's office and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms have not yet determined who the man is, but officials say they intend to find out and interview him in the next several days.

Fire experts who have seen footage of Thursday's fire say the flames moved rapidly, which suggested something inside the club was highly flammable.

Russell Moody, president of American Acoustical Products, in Holliston, Mass., which sells sound-reducing foam insulation, said using the urethane type of insulation would be an enormous fire hazard.

"Polyurethane foam can't be used in those types of locations unless it's treated first," to make it fire-resistant, he said. Though urethane foam is an effective sound and heat insulator used for industrial purposes, he said, "polyurethane is basically a plastic. When it gets into a fire it will smoke, and that's a big problem."

Robert Malcolm, a Fire Department captain in Asbury Park, N.J., said that urethane foam insulation burns much faster when it is attached to walls or any vertical surface.

"If it's laying flat, it just melts," Captain Malcolm said. "If it's vertical, it burns very fast." He said, "The flame will crawl right up the wall, and the smoke is toxic."

He said his department, and many others in New Jersey, do not allow "any foam on any wall" unless it carries a fire-resistant rating from the manufacturer.

"We check the bars every year. they're not allowed to have anything on the wall," he said. Jörg Hutmacher, manager of the architectural division of Illbruck, a Minnesota company that makes Sonex, a commercial noise insulation commonly used in music studios and clubs, said that the television images suggested that the material in the Station was not made for acoustic purposes.

"I think this was a kind of packaging foam that had no fire-resistant material," Mr. Hutmacher said. "Packaging polyurethane, which is a very low-grade inexpensive material, there is no fire rating in the world for that. It just goes up like gasoline."

He added, "That would tell me that it is a poly-ether foam, which is a lower grade foam that is a flammable material."

Tonight, at a wake in Warwick for Tracy F. King, a 33-year-old part-time bouncer at the Station who perished while helping patrons escape the fire, several club employees described the insulation as covering the wall behind the band's drummer, as well as the walls on either side of the stage, and on the ceiling. The charcoal-tinted foam, which they said was about three inches thick with a wave pattern on one side similar to common egg-crate foam, even covered an exit door near the stage.

"It was all over," Mr. Breese said.

In the three or four minutes in which the club was fully ablaze, thick globs of what looked like melted foam fell from the ceiling and the walls, many survivors said.

As he fought to escape the burning building's dance area near the stage, Chris Nowicki, 30, said material that looked like melted soundproofing dripped on his head, burning him.

"It was some black melted stuff, and it was dripping all over the place," he said. "It dripped on my head and caused this burn," he said, reaching a hand to touch gingerly a saucer-sized purple scab at the crown of his

head.

Members of Great White, the band whose pyrotechnics ignited the Feb. 20 fire, have repeatedly said the club gave them permission for the display. The owners, Jeffrey and Michael Derderian, have denied that.

But today, Domenic Santana, the owner of the Stone Pony club in Asbury Park, N.J., who has said Great White had recently used pyrotechnics during a performance without his permission, said that whether the Derderian brothers knew about the fireworks may not matter.

"The club is ultimately responsible, whether they knew or not," he said. "That's the bottom line. Anything else is pointing fingers."

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