



Case Study –

Emergency services completed early at recent Mitchell School fire, smoke and soot disaster

By Malcolm Stone

The students at Mitchell Middle School returned to classes on March 18 after a devastating fire that raced through the attached elementary school's multi-purpose room early on February 27. Thousands of man-hours were spent cleaning and repairing the site over two weeks. The damage occurred when a fire broke out in Mitchell Elementary School, which is connected to the middle school. Both schools were uninhabitable due to smoke, soot and water damage which permeated the 217,000-square-foot, two-story structure located at 2701 Drexel Avenue in Racine, Wis. Soot was caked onto most surfaces with a smoky odor throughout the building and an inch of water standing in many first-floor offices and classrooms.

Demolition crews from Milwaukee –based Paul Davis National and Paul Davis Restoration and Remodeling of Southeast Wisconsin were permitted to be onsite with preliminary clean-up and stabilization on the night of the fire. The company started the large-scale work just four days after the fire broke out. The fire was intense causing the roof to collapse in some parts of the building and destruction throughout most of the school. When the roof collapsed in the multi-purpose room, the remaining areas of interior and exterior walls also caved in. However, Paul Davis completed the large loss project more than 12 hours ahead of schedule and the deadline date was met for teachers and students to return to their classrooms. Crews worked around the clock with approximately 440 highly-skilled technicians and professionals from the local Paul Davis offices and the community. Racine Unified School District's Director of Buildings and Grounds Bryan Arnold said the school has passed all of its environmental and safety standards by industrial hygienists and inspectors, and he applauded the hard work from the restoration company and Racine Unified School District's buildings and grounds staff.

Paul Davis painstakingly cleaned up smoke and soot from virtually every space in the Middle School along with sanitizing and cleaning contents while emptying 1,200 individual student lockers with items bagged and tagged for identification. Hundreds of pounds of hard and soft goods were packed up, identified, and cleaned and laundered at Paul Davis' contents facility in Milwaukee. To manage the process, Paul Davis worked with teachers and labeled materials in the classrooms with some items to be saved and some to be discarded. Paul Davis crews took pictures of rooms and contents, so that after cleaning and sanitizing, the items could be placed back in the spaces exactly - arranging it all according to the photos and story board pictures created by the Paul Davis team. With cleaning most of the students' lockers and personal contents, Paul Davis workers had to first cover the lockers in plastic and utilized special hydroxyl generators to eliminate fire and smoke odors. The items were replaced in the lockers for students when they returned to school. Asbestos abatement and the clean up and sanitizing of the school cafeteria were priorities of the job.

The restoration crews also determined the need for installing temporary drywall in hallways that connected the middle and elementary schools in order to isolate areas that were still damaged in order to control odor and prevent access.

Paul Davis replaced tiling affected by water damage and utilized dozens of air movers that circulated more than 2,500 cubic feet of air per minute to help eliminate odors. Crews waxed the newly installed floors for students to head back to the middle school which is now fully functional.

Middle school students will be required to stay in school an additional 40 minutes per day for the rest of the school year to make up for lost time in the classroom. Elementary students are attending the formerly vacant Wind Point Elementary School in Racine.

According to J. Murphy, director of operations for Paul Davis National, he believes Mitchell school is now cleaner than when the structure was originally built in the 1930s. "We restored the fire alarm system, new ceiling tiles in the middle school, painted the school's walls, and installed new carpeting and floor tiles. We removed debris, wiped away soot, dusted, vacuumed and cleaned every item in every room, to name just a few of the immense details about this job," he said. Racine Unified maintenance crews worked diligently to restore power, heat and water to the facility. The District's grounds crews cleared snow and ice from the site.

When Racine Unified School District's Bryan Arnold stated the cleanup would have to be completed quickly for teachers and students to return to class by the March deadline, Murphy and his team called on their extensive management and technical expertise, which also helped to finish large fire loss jobs most recently in Waukesha and Milwaukee, to get the job done in time. Paul Davis worked with local union members who were notified of the large loss, but due to the severity and complexity of the job, the union agreed to permit Paul Davis to start and finish the extensive emergency services project.

Murphy and his team are thankful that on the morning of the loss, Jim Perencevic, Paul Davis' Emergency Response Coordinator, realized a devastating fire was occurring at the school. Perencevic was on the scene at 1:30 am during the time of the blaze and stayed with first responders and school officials until the fire was contained and next steps could be secured in fixing the building. Then, the team from the local Paul Davis office was able to board-up and make the building safe while Murphy was called in to inspect the fire damage with highly-specialized crews to begin the work. Also, Tim Purcell, Paul Davis' Structural Estimator, worked with Perencevic to ensure that all local permitting was in place and officials were aware of the work in progress.

Paul Davis National's senior project managers, Neal Lengacher and Winston Bean, were charged with overseeing day and night crews during the entire process. Lengacher summarized the 24/7, two week job as he wrote to crews when the project was finished just 12 hours ahead of schedule. "Well, folks, it looks like we did it. Those who doubted, can now be believers," said Lengacher. "All air and surface testing has passed. The fire marshal has approved the egress plans and the alarm system repairs. New floors are waxed, the paint is dry and new carpets are laid. We will be down to a skeleton crew of less than 50 on Sunday, and we will welcome back the teachers at 7:45am Monday, and the students on Tuesday," he said. "It has been a fun and exciting two weeks, and I cannot begin to express my gratitude to everyone involved. Great work."

Lengacher also shared an important philosophy with the Paul Davis team about his take on the job and how Paul Davis was able to complete the work. "About 10 years ago, someone shared a quotation with me. It is simply titled, 'Attitude.' I immediately printed copies of it and posted it in my office areas, my trailers, and even inside buildings that we are working on," said Lengacher. "I believe in these words, and I try to pass it on to everyone involved with our projects. I believe that attitude is part of what allows us to succeed at projects such as this," he said. "I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it."

The Home Depot stores in Milwaukee and Racine also assisted with the highly visible project. The stores shipped in lumber, equipment and supplies for hours each day to meet the demanding work and days of freezing temperatures.

Paul Davis sent 53-foot tractor trailers to the school to support hundreds of crew members with highly-advanced equipment to accomplish the early deadline for the multi-million dollar emergency services project. Paul Davis also attended and helped out at the back-to-school celebration where the newly-restored structure and classrooms were unveiled.

During the job, all procedures were completed at the customer's direction and approvals were reviewed by the middle school staff, school district officials and the insurance carriers. Paul Davis and all other parties worked together to secure the project, develop the scope of work, execute the plan document and the progress, and calculated costs. Murphy made sure the process remained fluid and flexible to flow with the customer's requests, and his key objective was to present suitable options and make informed decisions. He said, "Customer service is not an 'add on' piece to our process. It is built in to the very heart of the Paul Davis organization."

According to Murphy, like many of Paul Davis' large losses, the Mitchell School project was brought under control quickly and effectively through an organized emergency response support protocol. "These types of losses are unpredictable and the response strategy must be managed with critical and immediate action. Paul Davis has a tremendous advantage in this arena due to our extensive experience," Murphy said. "Documentation must be delivered in an accurate and timely manner to ensure efficient cost containment. Our primary objective is to operate all loss sites efficiently by establishing in writing, its proposed tactics and techniques in advance of implementation." For more information contact J. Murphy at (281) 358-4077 or email jmurphy@pdnational.com. Visit the website at www.pdnational.com.

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About Paul Davis National: Paul Davis National specializes in large loss and is a member of the Paul Davis Restoration organization. Paul Davis is a franchise system made up of over 320 full service general contractors providing site stabilization, emergency water mitigation, fire restoration, mold remediation, document restoration, contents cleaning, and remodeling services. Paul Davis National owns numerous tractor trailers and support equipment that are deployed throughout the U.S. to support their national clients as well as their fellow franchisees in the case of a major disaster. The company is headquartered at 2010 S. 4th Street in Milwaukee, Wis. Visit the website at www.pdnational.com.

About Paul Davis Restoration & Remodeling of Southeast Wisconsin: Paul Davis Restoration & Remodeling of Southeast Wisconsin was established more than 20 years ago and is located at 2000 South 4th Street in Milwaukee. The Paul Davis office in Fox Valley is located at 1320 Gillingham Road in Neenah. The company has served the region with numerous community service initiatives since the 1990s. The local company is a franchise office of Paul Davis Restoration Inc., a leader in residential and commercial loss mitigation, reconstruction, and restoration services nationwide. For more information, call 414.383.3131. Visit the website at pdwisconsin.com. For more information about Paul Davis Restoration Inc., call 904.737.2779. Visit the website at www.pdwisconsin.com.

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