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WEST ROXBURY

Business strip revived 4 years after deadly fire; permanent memorial eyed

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Landlord and business owner Jack Kennedy, 59, sits on a patio bench holding his dog, "Junior," behind his grooming and kennel business in a retail strip he owns and rebuilt after a deadly fire broke out along Centre Street in West Roxbury four years ago.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

On a warm night in late August 2007, the world came to a standstill for many people in and around West Roxbury. Neighborhood business owner and landlord Jack Kennedy was among them.

It was a Wednesday. Roger Clemens was facing off against Josh Beckett at the old Yankee Stadium. And Kennedy and his young son David sat at home on the couch to watch the televised ballgame.

Around two hours into the contest, after his son's cell phone display lit up with an unknown number, the elder Kennedy decided to check his own phone. He had 61 missed calls.

A fire had broken out in the middle of a strip of retail property Kennedy owns along Centre Street.

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The Chinese restaurant where the fire began, and one business on each side, rented commercial space from him. Two storefronts down from where the blaze had ignited was the dog grooming and kennel shop Kennedy owns and operates.

He arrived at the scene around 45 minutes after the first fire trucks. The employees of all four businesses had evacuated safely. The several dozen dogs at the kennel were rushed into vans and received a clean bill of health.

Standing on the sidewalk opposite his commercial property alongside his son, his then-teenage daughter Lauren and his wife Karen, Kennedy watched officials hose the flames, allegedly fueled by grease buildup, as emergency sirens blared and several helicopters whirled overhead.

It was there he learned the unfathomable, devastating news – [two firefighters had perished](#).

“I was speechless. I didn’t know what to say. Where do you go; where do you even begin,” Kennedy said in a recent interview. “I know it’s a cliché thing to say, but: it just became surreal.”

(To see photos from the 2007 fire scene, [click here](#).)

Earlier this month, nearly four years after that horrifying evening, the last of the four properties Kennedy owns opened its doors, making the business strip whole once again. But the rebuilding process won’t be complete until a bronze plaque is installed – Kennedy hopes by this coming fall – to commemorate Firefighters Warren J. Payne and Paul J. Cahill, who paid the ultimate sacrifice trying to salvage the complex.

(To see photos from the firefighters’ memorial services, [click here](#).)

“It’s going to be something that a fireman would be proud of. That’s next on the agenda,” said Kennedy, leaning against a tree on a Centre Street sidewalk Tuesday outside his own shop, “[The Continental - Bed Bath and Bone](#).”

Fire department spokesman Steve MacDonald called the West Roxbury fire a tragedy. He said the fallen firefighters’ legacies will be carried on not only through such memorial plaques, but also through some potentially life-saving toughening of regulations for how restaurant duct and ventilation systems are cleaned and inspected. The 2007 fire led to those rule changes.

The firefighters’ deaths also led to a hard-fought push for [random drug and alcohol testing for firefighters](#), which the city [launched last fall](#). When responding to the fire, autopsies showed Cahill had a blood alcohol level three times the legal limit to drive, according to news reports. Payne had traces of cocaine in his blood.

Kennedy opened his dog grooming business in his native Roslindale 34 years ago. In 1994, he relocated it to the current space in West Roxbury. Two years later he added the kennel service. Eight years after that, he bought the four business properties from 1723 to 1729 Centre St.

Kennedy’s business is the only one of those four has not shut down since the deadly fire. The shop made use of some undamaged space and, for the first six months, parked a dog-grooming-equipped trailer out front to continue to take in dogs.

“[The neighbors rallied](#) around us.” In addition to fund-raising efforts for the fallen firefighters’ families, area residents brought food, offered to help clean up the damage or write a check to help the small business owners.

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"It was overwhelming how out of the way people went to make sure we were OK," said Kennedy, who is proud he was able to keep his 15 workers employed and paid on time throughout the ordeal. "The Mayor's Office and Main Streets, in particular, were here daily. They were unbelievable."

It took about a year before Kennedy was able to stomach looking at photographs from that fateful day and the ones of the somber funerals that followed. Much of that year was filled with sleepless nights, he said. His days began at 5 a.m. dealing with insurance phone calls and paper work, litigation, contractors and construction plans and trying to keep his business operational. Some days didn't end until around 2 a.m.

It took around two years and over \$1 million, in construction costs alone, to rebuild the four properties and another two years to see them go back into operation, he said.

"It's been a relatively quick time," the 59-year-old said. "The job was overwhelming, [but] it was worth it."

"The thought of not rebuilding never entered my mind. Never did I think: 'I'm going to walk away,'" added Kennedy. "I had faith that if I did something really beautiful, the right businesses would come in here and open and the people of West Roxbury would support it."

The former Tai Ho Restaurant space was the first to reopen two years ago. It is now occupied by a well-known, locally-run pizza chain. The former plant and flower shop next door is now a hair salon, and the former art gallery at the end of the strip most-recently opened as a bar and restaurant.

"There were a lot of people that wanted to rent these spaces," he continued, while watering several potted plants on a patio behind the dog grooming business. "I didn't want another bank. I didn't want a coffee shop. I wanted to put in businesses that people in West Roxbury would want, and that they could walk to."

Combined, the locally owned shops employ around 50 workers, most from nearby neighborhoods, Kennedy said.

"Right now, we have great tenants and businesses," he added later, sitting on the patio bench and holding his dog, Junior. "Everybody that has opened here emptied their savings accounts to open. They took out second mortgages or did whatever it took."

District 6 City Councilor Matt O'Malley praised the rebuilding efforts. He also recalled the night four summers ago when he drove home from working out at a nearby YMCA toward his home Jamaica Plain and watched ambulances and fire trucks whizz by in the other direction.

"It was just a horrible, horrible thing that happened. The community came together as we always do in West Roxbury," he said. "We'll always keep those two firefighters and their families in our thoughts and prayers."

In the past 17 years, eight Boston fire department members have died while on duty, including two since the 2007 West Roxbury fire. But Payne and Cahill are the department's only two firefighters who have perished in a fire since 1994.

"The fact that the building has been rebuilt and occupied, it's good to see," said the fire department spokesman. "It keeps the community vibrant. The city thrives on its neighborhoods."

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Neighborhood resident Dermot Loftus, who has been a firefighter in Brookline for just over one year, owns the newest business to open of Kennedy's four Centre Street properties.

"He did so much for us. We have a tremendous amount of respect for what Jack did," to rebuild the retail strip. "Sometimes it's easier to walk away. But he didn't."

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

The rebuilt business strip along Centre Street in West Roxbury.



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