

STATEMENT
SENATOR ROCKEFELLER'S COMMERCE COMMITTEE FIELD HEARING
JANUARY 28, 2013

Thank you Senator Rockefeller for your gracious invitation to share my experience during the gas pipeline explosion in Sissonville on Tuesday, December 11, 2012. Not only am I honored by your invitation, I am truly blessed to have survived my 40-45 minute ordeal and to be able to share that story with you today.

The front of my home faced Sissonville Drive where the explosion occurred. On the backside to the left, there is a flower garden and an in-ground pool, both of which are surrounded by a large privacy fence with a gate access to the **front** of the house. Towards the right backside are the driveway and garage areas, where my vehicle and another vehicle were parked. But, the corner of the flower garden is where I sought shelter that afternoon.

I was ready to walk out the door to run errands when I received a phone call from a lady named Trudy to schedule an appliance repair. Within seconds, Trudy and her co-workers became my only lifeline. I believe that call kept me from exiting my driveway onto Sissonville Drive, when and where the blast occurred, and where I believe I would have been killed instantly during the explosion.

Instead, I stood in the center of my home where it was trembling, shifting, shaking, grinding all around me; the ground rumbling beneath me, thinking the earth would open up at any moment

and swallow me. The noise was so loud I had to scream for Trudy to please stay on the line – that I believed there was an earthquake or possibly a plane had crashed.

Projectiles began falling like missiles through the ceiling into my home, and I felt an immediate intense heat that took my breath away.

As everything around me became more intense, I became more frightened. I dove underneath my dining room table, looked out the bottom of the sliding glass doors, only to see everything sizzling, blistering or melting. The vehicles and the ground were literally rocking, moving in waves. Hot steam was filtering up out of the ground, like hot springs.

I crawled from my shelter to peek out a **front** window only to see a huge wall of fire roaring as far as I could see. At that moment, I seemed to realize a gas line may have exploded, and that I was in extreme danger.

I ran out the back doors towards my flower garden, thinking that, if necessary, I could jump into the pool to protect myself from the fire. My first attempt failed because the heat was so intense that I was driven back inside my home. I returned to my spot under the table, becoming even more frightened, realizing the house must be on fire, and if it was a gas line explosion, both my home and I could explode at any moment.

Frightened, but thinking I had no other choice, I made another attempt to escape to the flower garden where I hid in the corner behind a withering vine and the privacy fence. I continued to scream into my phone – hoping Trudy could hear me because I could no longer hear her over the roar of the explosion which was so deafening that I felt my eardrums would explode.

The heat became more intense, suffocating, and the only area I could breathe was in that corner of the garden. I attempted once to run for the pool, but the heat and lack of air drove me back to my corner. I failed at several attempts of stacking landscaping stones around me, hoping they might protect me from the overwhelming heat. I feared the landscaping mulch surrounding me would burst into flame at any moment.

I rolled onto the ground to absorb some coolness, believing I would soon be burned alive if I couldn't keep damp. At one point I threw my purse over the fence to mark my location for any rescue attempts.

My only exits were to a **front** gate where the explosion was, or to the driveway area where the blast and huge fireball were also located. **I was trapped.**

I witnessed the earth being scorched, my home burning and melting, everything was blistering or exploding, my step-daughter's home imploding into ashes, and hearing the continuing roar of the explosion. I looked into the sky and wondered if maybe this was simply the end of the world.

I portrayed to Trudy that it was important to me that my family knew I fought hard to survive and that my last thoughts were of them. **I became defeated.**

Suddenly, two brave firemen (Scott Holmes and Eddie Elmore) came into sight. Word had been received I was trapped. They wrapped their arms around me and escorted me to safety, where I was loaded into an ambulance, treated for smoke inhalation, and then transported to a triage location where my family was waiting.

The relief I felt when I saw my daughter's beautiful face will remain in my heart forever. As the shock somewhat wore off, I began to understand the enormity of my experience, overwhelmed by the odds that I had defied. I learned that, most likely, I would have been scalded alive had I jumped into the pool. And, most certainly, I would have died from lack of oxygen and smoke inhalation had I remained inside my home.

Perhaps over the years I've picked up some survival skills from surviving breast cancer, losing our home to a fire five years ago in that same location, or listening to my youngest son's survival experiences with the 130th Air Guard, and from putting up with "war stories" from my husband, Paul, a retired Charleston firefighter. All I know for sure is that I'm truly blessed by God to be here today.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to share my survival experience of the Sissonville gas pipeline explosion on December 11, 2012.