

by: **Samaia Hernandez**

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### 75 years later, deadly circus fire will be remembered

people were killed when fire broke out during a matinee performance 75 years ago.

Kathy Kirsche Dwyer of [Hebron](#) recalls the events on July 6, 1944 as if they were her own, but it was her now deceased mother, Phyllis Rose Kirsche, who was forever changed by the tragedy at 9 years old.

Kathy said Phyllis and her best friend, Valerie, were inseparable.

On that day, Kathy's mom was playing dolls with Valerie Nogas, who lived across the street in [Wethersfield](#).

Kathy said, "July 12th would have been Valerie's 9th birthday, so to celebrate, her maternal grandmother was taking her to the circus and asked my mom to join them, so of course my mother was excited to go to the circus."

When Kathy's mom, Phyllis, called her mom to ask if she could go, the ultimate answer however, was 'no'.

"My grandmother asked my mother just one very simple life-saving question: 'Did you do your chores today?' And mom answered truthfully and said 'no' and so my

(WTNH)—Saturday, July 6 marks one of the worst disasters in Connecticut history: the [Hartford](#) circus fire. Nearly 170

Current  
**89°**



Fair

Tonight  
**71°**



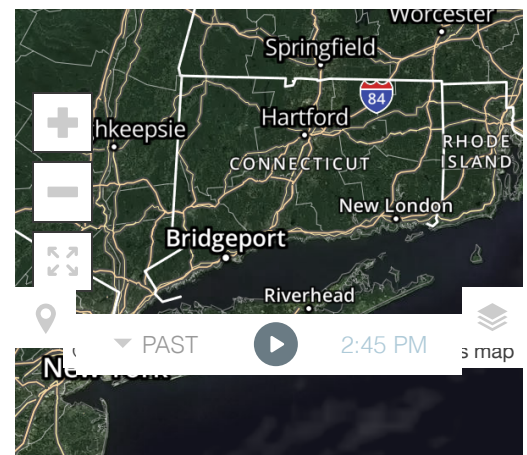
Partly  
Cloudy  
Precip: 20%

Tomorrow  
**84°**



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grandmother said ‘well then you cannot go,’” Kathy said.

The girls were upset, so Valerie gave Phyllis one of her dolls to take home so they could finish playing after the circus.

Valerie and her grandmother never came home.

6,000 to 8,000 people turned out for Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus. The fire, potentially caused by a tossed cigarette, broke out.

Within 10 minutes, the inflamed tent collapsed in, primarily women and children were trapped inside.

“That evening of the fire, Valerie’s father identified her body by only her white communion shoes. That’s how badly burned she was,” Kathy said.

A memorial was built at the site of the fire, in the north end of Hartford. It was built to bring closure to the thousands of families that were impacted by this fire, and the messages on the bricks tell their stories.

A now defunct waterproofing method, the tent had been covered with paraffin wax, thinned with gasoline. Nearly 170 people died on site and circus officials were later cited for negligence.

“After Valerie’s funeral,” Kathy added, “her mother came to [Phyllis] and gave her all of Valerie’s dolls and said ‘I think Valerie would like you to have her dolls!’”

The dolls are still part of the family, passed down to grandchildren now. Lessons from the tragedy also carried on.

Kathy said, “Mom taught me to cherish my friendships and to have a better understanding that what we have today, we might not have tomorrow. “

Phyllis Rose Kirsch died in 2007.

She remained close to her deceased friend’s parents until

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**SUN 21** **Ancient Mesopotamia Speaks: Hig...**  
Yale Peabody Museu... | New Haven, CT

**SUN 21** **Craft Expo**  
Guilford Town Gree... | Guilford, CT

**SUN 21** **Project Management Professional ...**  
Business Center | West Hartford, CT



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their respective deaths. She also never stopped talking about her friend Valerie.

“I cannot imagine what my mom went through at such a young tender age it’s hard enough for adults to process let alone a 9 year old to process,” Kathy said.

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