

## AFSA Scholarship Essay

I go to the beach on the Outer Banks of North Carolina every summer. My family of four piles into a large house by the ocean, which we share with my aunt and uncle and my four cousins. Sometimes, other relatives join us. We've had up to 15 people crammed into that house at one time.

My Dad and uncle grill steaks and seafood; my aunt yells at my oldest cousin for drinking too much (he's 26, and says he likes to "enjoy" his vacation); my other cousin sometimes smokes out on the deck, because no one likes the smell of cigars in the house. But in the 17 years I've been going to Duck, North Carolina, I've never, ever, thought that our two-week "get-away" would in any way be dangerous.

That is, of course, until fire destroyed a beach house very similar to the one we stay in, and not so far away on the North Carolina coast, killing six students from the University of South Carolina and one Clemson University student. Fire department authorities who responded to the early-morning blaze said that six students—all from USC—survived.

I started thinking about that fatal fire in October when it happened, and comparing it to my own beach-house experiences. Thirteen young adults had gone down to the North Carolina shore to spend a little time away from the stress of academics. They apparently drank a little too much, and smoked and cooked out on the deck, something that fire prevention officials say is a deadly combination. The Nelson family routinely has at least that many people "relaxing" in a house by the ocean every August, enjoying many of the same activities.

Debbie Smith, the mayor of Ocean Isle, North Carolina, where the fire broke out, told newspaper reporters at the scene that the fire "most likely was an accident," and started on one of the beach house's decks. Campus Firewatch, a monthly electronic newsletter devoted to the issue of campus fire safety, said in a recent posting that the 2006-2007 academic year was "the most fatal one on record," with 10 college campus-related fire deaths and 18 deaths occurring off-campus, including the Ocean Isle beach house fire. Campus Firewatch compiled its statistics from U.S. Department of Education reports.

Campus Firewatch is a "watchdog"-type organization, which devotes its resources to improving fire safety on college campuses. The group's recent posting about the North Carolina fire said that the disaster shared "common factors" with other fires involving college students during the past year, including "Lack of automatic fire sprinkler system; missing or disabled smoke alarms; careless disposal of smoking materials [and] impaired judgment from alcohol consumption."

A move in the South Carolina legislature is designed to encourage the state's businesses and homes to install fire sprinkler systems is a direct result of the recent beach house tragedy, as well as a fatal June furniture store fire in Charleston, South Carolina.

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Representative Bobby Harrell, the Speaker of the South Carolina House, introduced tax credit legislation in November that will provide businesses and home developers incentives to install life-saving fire sprinklers. The South Carolina House passed the legislation February 15, and it now awaits action from the State Senate. The Ocean Isle house where the seven students died had working smoke detectors but no fire sprinklers, according to multiple news reports.

"These are young people in the prime of their life," University of South Carolina President Dr. Andrew Sorensen said in an interview with a local television station. "They had so much to look forward to, and it is just profoundly tragic."

Professional firefighters agreed with Dr. Sorensen, and emphasized that fire safety precautions—such as installing fire sprinkler systems—should be taken just as seriously in vacation homes as they are in our hometowns.

"This is the same scenario we are seeing time and again," Ed Comeau, ex-chief fire investigator for the National Fire Protection Association and publisher of *Campus Firewatch* told *USA Today*. "It drives home the importance of fire safety no matter where you are." Sprinklers, according to Comeau, are an important part of staying safe. They would have helped save lives in the case of the Ocean Isle fire because sprinklers do not require any action on the part of the residents of a house. While smoke detectors will alert residents to the fact that a fire is occurring in a house, these detectors will not put the fire out, while sprinklers will. So, if the students in Ocean Isle had had a little too much to drink, they might not have been awakened by working smoke detectors. Fire sprinklers, however, would have put out the fire without any action on the students' part.

I haven't been back to the beach since the beach house tragedy in North Carolina. I don't even know if fire sprinklers are installed in the house we visit every summer. I do know, however, that when we spend time at the Outer Banks, we are all more relaxed, and are focused on enjoying our beach vacation. And, from my research for this essay, I've learned that the North Carolina Home Builders' Association is opposed to any laws that would force them to install fire sprinklers in new homes. That, in itself, is a tragedy. That a home builder would want to save a little money instead of saving lives is a crime.

The house we stay in is about 20 years old. I'll be very interested to see if we have the protection against fire that we need to have. And, I'll speak up if this isn't the case. Enjoying your vacation is one thing—staying safe while on vacation is something else, which is far more important.

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