

Hundreds of burn survivors visit Grand Rapids for conference

She doesn't let the burns define her. Pam Elliott nearly died in a house fire when she was 5 years old. Now she's an advocate, helping the Phoenix Society celebrate its new Grand Rapids location and annual conference.

Author: Shanna Grove

Published: 12 September 2018

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. - It was a day full of celebrations for the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, a non-profit advocating for fire prevention and the use of fire sprinklers.

The organization had a grand opening Sept. 12, for its new location at 525 Ottawa Ave. NW in downtown Grand Rapids.

The Phoenix Society is a national organization, which is headquartered in West Michigan.

The organization reached its \$6 million goal to help fund the new location and increase its digital abilities.

The money also supports new partnerships, more programming and investment in fire and burn prevention efforts.

The grand opening featured a live side-by-side burn to demonstrate the effectiveness of fire sprinklers in protecting people and property.

One of the event speakers was Pam Elliot, a burn survivor and registered nurse.

She shares her story as an advocate for the Phoenix Society.

“I was taking a nap in the upstairs of a two story country framed house that had an 'L' shaped staircase,” Elliot said.

Like most 5 year olds, she was rambunctious.

“I would get up and play, and my grandmother would say from the bottom of the staircase ‘young lady you better get back in that bed,’” Elliot said.

The wooden floors would give her away.

“I could never figure out how she knew I was up,” Elliot said.

One day her grandmother heard something different. It was a day that changed Elliot's life forever.

“This day, she heard noise, came to the stairwell, and it was blazing,” Elliot said.

The fire blocked her grandmother from going up the stairs.

“She came out of the house, up to the second story entrance, as she did, there was a high school senior,” Elliot said.

He spotted the smoke and sprung into action.

“He came in, got me out and actually took me to the hospital,” Elliot said.

She said he saved her life.

“In these old houses there was a light bulb that hung down over the stairwell, and my bed was beside the stairwell,” Elliot said. “So they assumed it was an electrical fire.”

She spent much of her life wanting to thank her hero.

“I did not meet this man until about 30 years later,” Elliot said. “When I met him, I was so excited.”

She now takes her story and advocates for other survivors.

“We have a fire problem in this nation, and it is preventable,” Elliot said.

The Phoenix Society works far and wide, and in our own backyard.

“We’ll continue to do the national campaigns we do, but we want to build the awareness in Grand Rapids in our hometown,” said Amy Acton, the Phoenix Society executive director. “Working with partners like Spectrum and the fire department to increase the burn safety and awareness, and inclusion of people with burn injuries.”

The organization is also hosting the 30th Annual Phoenix World Burn Congress in Grand Rapids this year, which started Wednesday, Sept. 12, and goes through Saturday, Sept. 15

The conference brings together hundreds of burn survivors, their families, medical professionals, and first responders.

There they can share stories, provide support, and increase knowledge.