

'They were family:' Uncertain future for longtime employees of fire-ravaged Martin's Country Market

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When his phone lit up just after 4 a.m. on the morning of Feb. 15, Randy Eshleman assumed someone was sick and calling off work.

Instead, Eshleman, a department manager at Martin's Country Market in Ephrata Township, checked his phone and saw a text message telling him the supermarket was on fire.

"The first thing that exploded out of my mouth was 'Oh, my God,' and I was out of my house quicker than I ever had been in my life," Eshleman recalled.

Eshleman lives 5 miles from the store and was rushing to try to get his notebooks, paperwork and computer — the things he would need to continue doing his job.

He assumed there would be a job to continue.

But he had driven only a half mile from his house when he saw the orange glow in the sky and the flames. Eshleman, 61, realized then that the store he had worked at for 25 years was going to be a total loss.

“Emotion took over me at that point and tears started flowing,” Eshleman said.

Martin’s Country Market, at 1717 W. Main St. (Route 322) in Ephrata Township, has been a staple in the community since the 1980s and employs about 120 people. The business was founded in 1932, and the current market was built in 1983.

It took less than six hours to reduce a building that held four decades of memories to rubble.

Despite firefighters arriving within minutes of the first report of the fire, flames reached the store’s roofline and spread rapidly. Because the market was built in the early 1980s, it was not required to have a sprinkler system.

A state police fire marshal has not yet determined what caused the fire.

Eshleman watched with his co-workers from the store’s parking lot as the place he worked at for a quarter of a century burned down. Among those standing with him were Ken White and Michele Bauder Shimp, each 46 years old, each a 29-year veteran of the store, having worked there since they were teenagers.

White, a meat cutter, was putting on his boots for work when he got a call telling him about the fire. He drove to the store that morning to see it for himself.

“I had to see it because I just couldn’t fathom it happening,” White said. He stayed for nearly five hours watching the building crumble.

Shimp, a dairy department lead, was on her way to work when she got the call. She started working in the grocery department at Martin's during her senior year of high school and over the years had developed a deep connection to the Martins, their vendors and especially the patrons.

For each of the longtime employees, the store was a home away from home.

"They were family," Shimp said. "They were my friends. I spent eight, nine hours with them a day."

What they lost

Eshleman's office was in the back of the store. His door was filled with photos of fishing trips, friends and family. He displayed a fingerpainting his granddaughter made him when she was 2 and a stuffed camel that his staff gave him because he loved the "It's hump day" Geico commercial from the early 2010s.

There is nothing left to recover, he said.

"I wonder about something, then think, 'Oh, yeah, that was in my desk drawer,'" Eshleman said.

White had personal photos at the store and, of course, his knives, which as a meat cutter were his livelihood.

But while many of the items lost in the fire held some value, they were just things. The real loss, the longtime employees said, was the daily contact with their co-workers — their work family.

“Yes, the building was lost, but that can be rebuilt. And the inventory was lost; that can be repurchased,” Eshleman said. “One-hundred twenty employees — our lives are impacted so much. It’s devastating to all of us. You know, we’re all struggling with where to go from here. What’s next? We’re all ... we’re all lost. We’re floundering.”

“I can’t even fathom trying to think of another job I’d want to do or another company I’d want to work for,” White said. “Because the Martins are not replaceable.”

Store President Nevin Martin said on the day of the fire that the family intends to rebuild, but has not commented beyond that since then. Martin did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

Every morning, White said, Martin would begin his day by walking around the store, greeting the staff and talking to them about what was going on in their lives. Losing that type of connection with an employer is hard for White to process.

Eshleman continues to do some managerial work, such as contacting vendors for invoices. He also writes the seafood ads for the Family Owned Markets group, a conglomerate of locally owned grocery stores of which Martin’s is a member.

Eshleman and two other managers set up a [GoFundMe](#) to help Martin's Country Market employees with basic needs such as food and clothing. As of March 4, the fundraiser had generated just over \$4,500 of its \$12,000 goal.

Shimp said she is trying to just make it moment by moment and does not know what tomorrow will bring.

White said the Martins continue to pay full-time staff for the time being, but there is no definite answer to how long that will last. At the moment, he said, money isn't something he needs to worry about.

"There's still more negative than positive," White said. "We really don't know what's going to happen in our lives."