

THE VOICE OF BURN SURVIVORS

Pam Elliott

Burn-survivor advocate, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

» **Advocacy work:** Using her personal burn story to advocate for home fire sprinklers. FireSprinklerInitiative.org/NorthCarolina

“We’re going to have backup cameras in all cars, but we can’t get doggone fire sprinklers in all new homes?”

There were no screams, no pain. Pamela Elliott can’t even recall the smoke or flames that enveloped her bedroom inside her West Virginia home as she awoke that April day in 1959. Elliott does remember a young man, a stranger who saw the house fire from the highway, wrapping her in his navy-blue jacket and whisking her to safety.

Elliott, then five, only screamed when she assumed the man carrying her was going to throw her into a nearby rose bush. Instead, he gently placed her in his car and sped to the nearest hospital at 80 miles an hour.

At first, the third-degree burns on 50 percent of her body—face, arms, hands, upper chest, legs, back, and feet—hardly fazed Elliott. Neither did the realization that the fire had fused her fingers’ end joints; the digits, while altered, were fully functional. “My mother instilled in me that I was just like any other little girl and I can do anything other little girls can do,” says Elliott, 60, now living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She says that, while she spent more than a decade undergoing reconstructive surgery during her elementary and high school years, not a single peer poked fun at her appearance.

Then came college. Her heart set on becoming a physician’s assistant, Elliott was told by medical personnel that her appearance “would instill in patients a deeper fear” of doctors. “Honey, what happened to you?” was a common query while she attended Piedmont International University. “That’s when I became acutely aware of my appearance,” says Elliott. “I became an angry, snotty, bitter woman.”

Even so, a personal mantra from her family—“what happened to you happened for a purpose”—kept running through her mind during this dark period. In her 40s, she entered what she calls the “burn world” by linking up with other survivors and volunteering in her local hospital’s burn unit. These events have fine-tuned Elliott’s purpose, she says. “I’m here to speak for

those who can’t speak for themselves and those most vulnerable in house fires: infants, children, the elderly, and the disabled,” says Elliott, a part-time nurse at Wake Forest Baptist Health in Winston-Salem.

Elliott’s voice has become a powerful tool in the push for sprinkler requirements. She has joined an army of other burn survivors who have taken sprinkler advocacy training provided by the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering people affected by burn injuries through peer support, education, and advocacy. Combining survivor stories with tips on crafting noteworthy presentations and leveraging the media, the training has helped fine-tune Elliott’s outreach efforts.

She’s discussed sprinklers during a number of national events, and is a constant presence at her local elementary school, where she gives presentations that include information from the Fire Sprinkler Initiative. Elliott has also brought her voice to the newly formed North Carolina Fire Sprinkler Coalition, and her ability to articulate the need for sprinklers to combat home fire deaths and injuries has already placed this group on the map. In September, NFPA, the Phoenix Society, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, and Common Voices—a coalition of individuals, including Elliott, impacted by fire—commended Elliott for her pointed sprinkler op-ed piece that appeared on FirefighterNation.com. In that commentary, she tied the current push for sprinkler requirements to the efforts of a federal transportation agency to reduce child runover deaths through the mandatory installation of backup cameras in vehicles.

“We’re going to have backup cameras in all cars, but we can’t get doggone fire sprinklers in all new homes?” she asks. “I applaud them for doing that, but there are children also dying in homes and we’ve been so slow to respond. It’s been 55 years since my accident.”

LOUD AND CLEAR

Pam Elliott has brought her burn-survivor perspective to the sprinkler discussion locally, regionally, and nationally.