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“YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE”

A NEW VIDEO RELEASE FROM NIOSH ON THE SUNSHINE MINE FIRE

Experience, it is said, is the best teacher. Some experiences, however, should be shared so that no one else will ever have to live through them again. The fire at the Sunshine Mine is one such experience.

“Hard-rock mines don’t burn.”

The Sunshine Mine near Kellogg, ID, was the nation’s premier silver producer for many years. In 1972, the mine was nearly 6,000 feet deep, contained hundreds of miles of worked-out areas, and employed nearly 500 people. Because of its depth and the type of host rock for the silver (unburnable quartzite), the general thinking of the day was that fires in mines such as the Sunshine were impossible, because “hard-rock mines don’t burn.” What wasn’t really considered was that timber supports, foam insulation, and mining equipment do burn and that the carbon monoxide gas produced by burning is far more deadly than fire itself.

Thus, no one was prepared when, on May 2, 1972, a fire of unknown origin broke out below the 3100 level of the mine. Before long, 173 miners on the day shift were trapped by thick, black smoke. By the time the fire was out, 91 miners had died, and the Sunshine Mine Fire became known as one of the worst mine disasters of the 20th century. It became the catalyst for passage of the Metal/Nonmetal Health and Safety Act of 1977, which applied the same federal safety standards to hard-rock mines as those regulating coal. Mandated safety training, mine inspections, and equipment standards were brought into force.

Creation of the video

“You Are My Sunshine” is the result of over 60 hours of taping and interviewing 27 survivors of the Sunshine Mine Fire, families of both survivors and victims, and members of the community over a

period of 20 months. Footage from the mine itself shows areas discussed by the interviewees. Re-enactments of escapes from the mine were shot in the Sunshine and in mines nearby. Historic photographs and movies, artifacts and props, and background information place the Sunshine in its environmental, cultural, and historic setting.

The resulting video is not only a memorial to those who died, but also serves as a training film that points up the lessons learned from the fire and how the fire led to improvements in mine safety procedures, equipment, and planning. In fact, almost no part of hard-rock mining was left untouched by the after-effects of this fire.

The final video on the Sunshine Mine Fire is 68 minutes long. It is part of a series of videos being created by NIOSH to improve mine safety training. While originally designed for mine rescue teams, “You Are My Sunshine” is being shown to people in underground and surface mining, and hard-rock, aggregate, and coal mining. It shows clearly what can result when the unexpected happens and no plan has been created to deal with it. This video is extremely relevant to all in the mining industry.

For More Information

To obtain a copy of this video or for more information, contact Elaine Cullen, Spokane Research Laboratory, E. 315 Montgomery, Spokane WA 99207 (509) 354-8057 efc8@cdc.gov

To receive additional information about occupational safety and health problems, call **1-800-35-NIOSH (1-800-356-4674)**, or visit the NIOSH Web site at www.cdc.gov/niosh

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Figure 1.—Interviewing Jim Lamphere, a survivor of the Sunshine Mine Fire.



Figure 2.—Sunshine Mine memorial at the bottom of Big Creek just off Interstate 90 near Kellogg, ID. The plaque lists the names of the 91 miners who died in the fire.