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COVER PAGE FOR  
The Providence Journal “Survivor’s Story” article  
related to the February 20, 2003 fire at  
The Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island

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[http://www.projo.com/extra/2003/stationfire/archive/projo\\_20030310\\_mike10.95e7b.html](http://www.projo.com/extra/2003/stationfire/archive/projo_20030310_mike10.95e7b.html)

**Beneath a pile of people who collapsed on top of him during the rush to escape the burning nightclub, Mike Vargas “rolled over to his side and curled up into the fetal position. Instinct told him staying on his side would protect his spine and airway.”**

**CHAS NOTES:**

I heard this guy interviewed on **The TODAY SHOW** within a day or so after the fire occurred. I immediately recognized the importance of how and why he survived, and began looking for articles about his ordeal. But, couldn't find one. It wasn't until January of 2006 (when searching again) that I finally this account. Then, it took me another few months to get it posted (August, 2006). My apologies for the delay.

During his **TODAY SHOW** interview, Mike talked about feeling bodies piling up on top of him. He talked about instinctively knowing that; if he stayed on his back or his stomach beneath the pile of bodies, that he wouldn't be able to breathe. He instinctively believed that being on his side would keep his “chest” from being compressed, and allow him to continue breathing. He was very close to being absolutely correct – close enough, that his positioning DID saved his life.

What Mike didn't know, is this: The primary reason that rolling to his side saved Mike's life was that it protected his ABDOMEN from being compressed, ensuring that his diaphragm would have freedom to move, allowing him to continue breathing until rescue came! Even though he was “wrong” about WHY it worked, he was absolutely RIGHT about the importance of rolling to his side. Had he been on his back or his stomach, he probably would have died of asphyxia due to “Riot Crush”!

A “PRINTER VERSION” of this article is available via a link from its Internet webpage. But, the “Printer Version” page address doesn't work unless it is accessed from the article's main Internet webpage. So, I copied the printer version to make this PDF file.

YOURS, Ms. Charly D. Miller  
<http://www.charlydmiller.com>



## **A survivor's story: Saved by a pileup**

**While the nightclub burned around him, Mike Vargas was trapped by a pile of patrons two feet from the door for more than an hour.**

**03/10/2003**

**BY CATHLEEN F. CROWLEY**  
**Journal Staff Writer**

Pinned under a mound of people, Raul Michael Vargas survived The Station fire with endurance, willpower and luck.

"Mike" Vargas, 31, of Johnston, estimates he was trapped for more than an hour as the nightclub burned down around him. People on top of him and next to him died or were severely burned, but Vargas was pulled out and literally walked away with a few burns on his leg and scalp.

"There was no way I should have gotten out of there," Vargas said.

His story of survival is astonishing, but rescue workers at the fire say it happened. Only the length of time he was trapped is murky.

"We did pull people out of that pile," said Warwick Fire Chief Jack Chartier. "There were some that were deceased and some that were alive."

Chartier said time moved so quickly that night, he couldn't pinpoint how long it took to find the last survivors. But Vargas's estimate that 60 to 90 minutes passed before firefighters rescued him was quite possible, Chartier said.

Vargas, who was born and raised in Toms River, N.J., lives in Johnston with his wife, Melanie A. Vargas, 32, a dental hygienist, and son Bryan M. Vargas, 10. Vargas manages the General Nutrition Center in Johnston.

Vargas went to The Station alone the night of the fire to see his seventh Great White concert.

"They put on an unbelievably entertaining show just by their music alone," he said.

He wasn't drinking. Vargas said he doesn't drink or smoke and has never taken drugs. Athletic and health-conscious, his lean face and muscular body attest to his lifestyle.

Vargas bumped into a few friends at the club, including Andrea and Steven Mancini, who were working at the club, and Dave McGinn.

As the night progressed, the small club became crowded.

When Great White started playing around 11 p.m., Vargas was standing a few feet in front of guitarist Ty Longley. The lead singer, Jack Russell, waited in the wings for a dramatic entrance. The crowd was going nuts, Vargas said.

Russell came on stage and, just before he began to sing, sparks flew from a pyrotechnics machine behind him.

"As soon as I saw the flames, I knew it wasn't part of the show, but I wasn't worried," Vargas said. "I thought they'd put it out and they'd go on with the show."

But Vargas said no one emerged with a fire extinguisher and he didn't see anybody pull a fire alarm.

"I realized they were going to let it burn," he said. "I didn't think anything bad. I was just like 'I've got to get out of here.' "

He turned and began moving toward the main door, but some patrons were standing still, eyes fixed on the stage.

"I just picked people up as I went so I wouldn't trip over them," he said.

Embers from the fire started to burn through his Lycra ski cap. He brushed off the hat and kept moving.

As the mass followed the most direct route to the doors, Vargas detoured around a free-standing wall, and rejoined the river of people on the other side. The force of the crowd behind him was growing.

He almost made it to the exit.

Vargas said he tried to stay upright by putting his hands on the person in front of him, but the pressure from behind overwhelmed him. He fell to the floor, two feet from the door.

He rolled over to his side and curled up into the fetal position. Instinct told him staying on his side would protect his spine and airway.

"People were piling up on top of me and I could feel the press of people," he said.

He forced himself to stay calm.

"If you freak out, I'm going to die," he told himself.

He could breathe in cool, fresh air. He wasn't even hot. But he couldn't move.

"It felt like a football pileup," he said.

Vargas said he wasn't concerned about dying, though images went through his head of someone telling his wife and son that he died. He prayed to his father, who was killed in a construction accident in 1994.

"I wanted to stay calm. I didn't want to move because I didn't want the pile to topple on me," he said. "I had air and I didn't feel any heat. I wasn't crushed or feeling crushed. I was in a relaxed state. I just felt calm and focused."

Vargas didn't let his mind race either.

"I wasn't saying 'When are they going to get here to get me?' I broke it into steps," he said.

First he waited for the sound of sirens. He heard them and knew he was one step closer to rescue.

He heard the firefighters talking, then he felt the water from the fire hoses.

But a comment Vargas overheard from one firefighter nearly unglued him.

" 'Oh my God. They are all dead,' " he heard. "That got to me."

Until then, Vargas did not comprehend the devastation.

"I knew it was bad because we were stuck there, but I didn't know how bad," he said.

The calls for help from people around him had faded. Vargas himself remained silent.

"It didn't make sense for me to scream. What were the chances they would hear me screaming from underneath the pile? Plus I had to conserve as much energy as possible," he said.

Finally, he felt the load above him lighten as firefighters searched for survivors.

He saw a firefighter's boot and reached for it. The firefighter gripped him and wouldn't let go, Vargas said. It took a couple of tugs and Vargas was freed.

"A few people were still alive. They were screaming," he said. "All around me people were dead."

Vargas stood up and walked out.

"My plan at that point was just to go home," he said. "I knew if I looked back I would be really messed up. When you're up high, don't look down. Same thing. I thought 'Don't look back.' "

Halfway across the parking lot, rescue workers steered him onto a gurney and took him to an ambulance. An emergency worker took his vital signs and asked for the time for the medical record. Vargas remembers it as 12:35 a.m. -- about an hour and a half after

the fire broke out. According to Miriam Hospital officials, Vargas was first evaluated in the emergency room at 12:50 a.m.

Vargas suffered four third-degree burns on his left leg, the largest about the size of a potato.

He is still coughing up soot from the smoke he inhaled and sleeping is difficult. He said he sees visions of the dead and burned.

A few days after the fire, he returned to The Station.

Vargas said everything was charred black except the patch of red tiles he had been lying on.

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Restraint Asphyxia Library  
in August, 2006

<http://www.charlydmiller.com/RA/RAlibrary.html#RhodeIslandFire>