

Worker injured when pipe burst

By WENDY GREENFIELD

Advance Staff Writer

Michael Draper never would have suspected that his first day on the job would have started out with a bang.

The 18-year-old West Brighton construction worker was in a dirt hole digging for a pipeline alongside a backhoe operator at the corner of South Gannon Avenue

and Victory Boulevard in Willowbrook at 9:18 a.m. yesterday, when all of a sudden he was thrown high into the air by a powerful blast of gasoline.

"It picked me up 10 feet and threw me," the blond, green-eyed man said, standing with his father behind a roped-off area at the scene of the pipeline accident. "It felt like I was burning."

Draper, wearing a black sleeveless T-shirt and denim cutoffs, had just returned from St. Vincent's Medical Center, where he was treated for chemical burns to the eyes, when he recounted the incident.

Although there were six Emergency Medical Service ambulances on the scene, Draper said he was taken to the hospital in a bystander's car.

A spokesman for St. Vincent's Medical Center said the worker was the only person treated for injuries as a result of yesterday's gasoline leak.

Draper's father, John, also a construction worker, said he had been working on a job on Richmond Terrace when a co-worker told him his son was hurt in the accident.

"It was Michael's first day on the job, and it started with a bang," he said later. "This could have been a disaster."

Walter Mrozinski of Willowbrook said he was waiting for an express bus to Manhattan at the corner of South Gannon and Victory when he was suddenly splashed across the face with what felt like a bucket of gasoline.

"It was like a burning sensation all over," said Mrozinski, who later continued on his journey to Manhattan with a gas-stained suit, and smelling of the fuel. "What I'd like to know is how can I collect for damages to my suit."

According to officials at the scene, construction workers were attempting to repair a leaky valve in a 12-inch underground pipe when an excavation contractor using a backhoe struck a fitting to a valve. James Kelly, a safety official with Buckeye Pipe Line Co., which owns the pipeline, said the fitting is used to take pressure readings from the line. The valve was being replaced because of a faulty "operator," a device governing its closure.

The pipeline rupture released a 60-foot geyser of highly explosive fuel and forced the evacuation of residents from 30 nearby homes

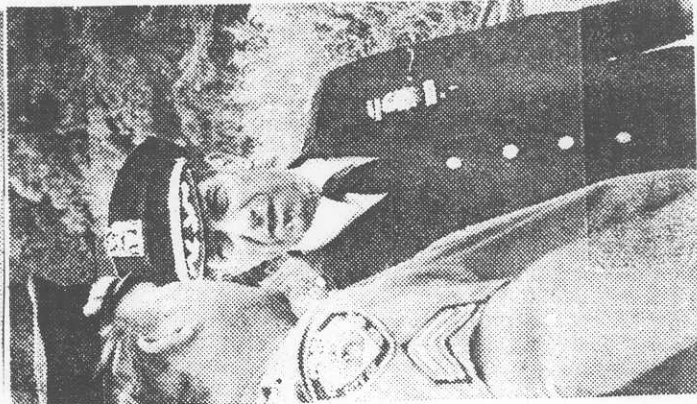
and 50 children from Alphabetland Pre School Center at 2734 Victory Blvd.

"It flowed all over the street as far as Alphabetland," firefighter Philip DeFillipo of Engine Co. 153 in Stapleton said. "If this thing had ever exploded it would have blown bodies all over the place."

Dozens of bystanders, reporters and television cameramen huddled around the scene, watching firefighters from throughout the city spray a thick layer of foam along the streets to prevent the hazardous fumes from igniting.

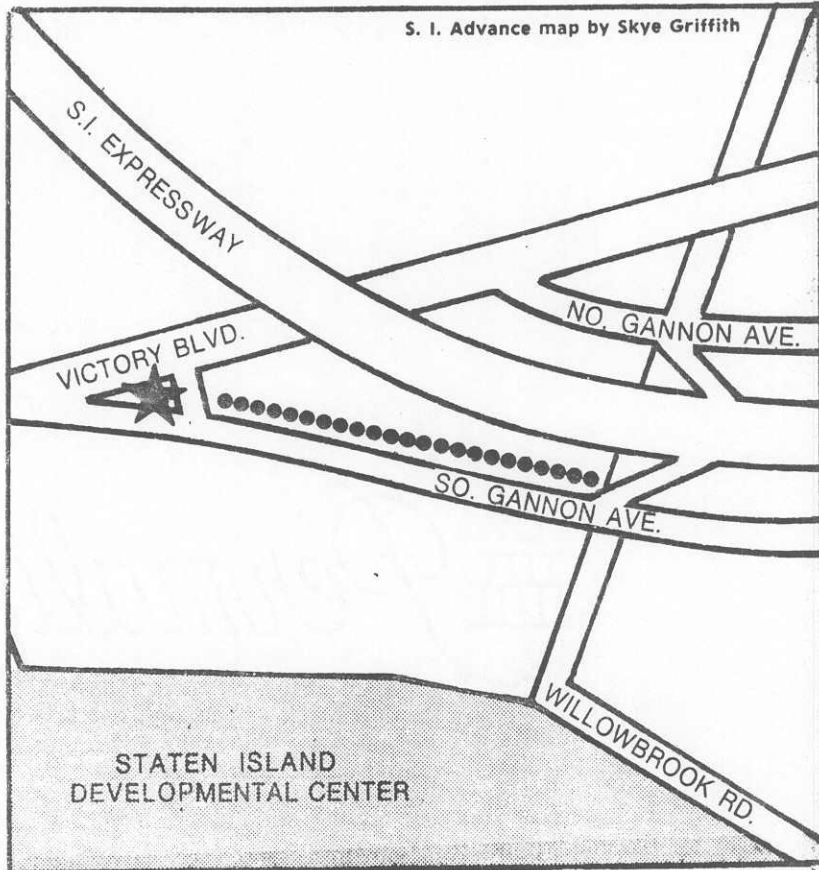
Joseph Lello, a deputy fire chief in Broward County, Fla., formerly of Eltingville, was visiting the Fire Department's borough command headquarters on Clove Road in Concord, when an alarm rang there.

"One thing New York has is sheer manpower," he said. "There's a good system of command ... There are companies here from Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, and yet residents in New York City can still rest at ease that if a fire broke out they would be covered."



S.I. Advance Photo by Steve Zaffarano

Borough Police Commander Samuel Marino at the creek cleanup site.



Star indicates where pipeline was broken. Circles indicate area where homes and preschool were evacuated.