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Big News Story

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Local Heroes

Over the years, many people have been declared heroes. Some being from the military, some being police officers, and some being paid firefighters. The most overlooked group of people is the volunteer firefighters. But what does it take to be a firefighter? Every member has similar, yet different answers. Members of volunteer departments join and serve for many different reasons. They also have different memories of the past and calls that they have run. And finally, each of them has their own definition of what courage is.



Chris VanLuvender, Fire Chief of the Avoca Volunteer Fire Department, has risen through the ranks over the years. Having joined the department in 1965, he started as a senior member. VanLuvender said that he joined due to family tradition as well as to serve his community. According to VanLuvender, it

takes many different qualities to be a firefighter. The first of these qualities is dedication. One must be dedicated to the job and push himself/herself to perform the tasks that are required. Also, one must be willing to train and set aside the time to take the classes associated with training. Next, one must have good physical and mental health in order to perform the required tasks. The last quality that a person needs to become a firefighter is courage. “Courage is the ability to know your limitations and to be safe at what you do. Also, it is having the ability to extend that knowledge into getting the job done.” says VanLuvender.

Over the years Chris has run many calls and has responded to many different emergencies. There was one call though that had stuck in his mind. During a fire VanLuvender had fallen through a floor. According to VanLuvender, “being trapped and knowing that my fellow firefighters were coming for me is a feeling that I will never forget.” Chris continues to run as Avoca’s Fire Chief today.



Chris Collins is also a volunteer firefighter for Avoca. Although he hasn’t been a member as long as Chief VanLuvender, he still has climbed his way up the ranks to become an officer in the department. Collins is a Sergeant for the Avoca Fire Department. He joined because his dad was a firefighter, and also to help the community. According to Collins, to be a firefighter one must have

“training and the desire to help others”. He has a different opinion though than the Chief as to what courage is. Collins says that “courage is the willingness to go the extra mile”. Collins has one incident that remains clear in his memory. A few months ago, he and some other guys from the department had volunteered to go to PNC Field to monitor the fireworks show after the baseball game. PNC field is where the New York Yankees farm team plays. After every Friday night home game, there is a fireworks display and the local departments will take turns monitoring them. Usually the show would go smoothly and everyone will leave unharmed. This time was different though. Something went wrong, and the fireworks had exploded. The explosion had seriously injured the two men that were in charge of the fireworks show. The reason that this incident remains in Collins’ mind is because he and the other members of the department were the first on the scene, he was the officer in command and had to react and help without getting anyone hurt or even killed. Collins also still runs with Avoca as the Sergeant.



The last member to give his story was Robert Matthews. Robert is the retired Rescue Chief. Having become a firefighter when he was 18, Robert has been in the business for 56 years. Robert started by just hanging around the fire house when he was 18. From there, he began to train and run calls with Avoca. “It takes the willingness to do the job, and teamwork to be a firefighter” according to

Matthews. When asked what his most memorable call was, Robert responded “it was a car accident on Laurel Street in Pittston.” The car had caught fire with the victims still in the car. The victims were burned severely. Whether they had survived or not was not stated. The car had hit a meat truck. When the victims were extricated and the fire extinguished, there was meat hanging on the car and truck. The sight of the meat had started to make people sick. With all the calls that Robert has run and the years that he has put in, his definition of fear is the simplest. “Courage is the lack of fear, but having the smarts to not push your limits” Matthews says. Although he doesn’t go into the fires anymore, Robert still stays active with Avoca by driving the trucks.

The three men above are a very small fraction of a huge number of volunteer firefighters around the world that put their lives on the line. Though they may be overlooked sometimes, these men still contribute a great deal to their community, and are considered heroes by some. Whenever help is needed, they are there to respond to the call.