

Courage and tradition: Through the eyes of the firefighters

BY KAREN CARR KEEFE
Senior Contributing Writer
Part II

The Tribune/Sentinel had the opportunity to talk with several longtime firefighters and three women firefighters who are taking leadership roles in the Adams Fire Co. of Wheatfield. The occasion was the fire company's 100th anniversary installation dinner on April 20.

We are pleased to share their stories as the fire company celebrates a century of service to the community.

Jim Mihalko and Bob Pino
Jim Mihalko is in his fourth year as president of Adams Fire Co. and is in his 48th year as a member. He was chief in 1985 and 1987 and served on the board of directors for more than a decade.

"My dad was in the company before me. My mom will be here tonight. She's in the Auxiliary. She's 90. It's a family affair - you get addicted," Mihalko said.
"I don't think some of the young people take it as seriously as we do. It's kind of a family thing. Back even when I was growing up, there weren't as many activities as there are now. They've got karate, they've got softball, they've got soccer and all those."

Mihalko and Bob Pino both have three generations of firefighters in their families - they, their parents and their adult children make the tradition that a number of the Adams Fire Co. leadership can claim. There are multiple two-generation members, as well.

"It's good to see," Mihalko said. "It's a constant thing - retention, recruiting people. A few years ago, we had 60 members; we're about 42 now. The pandemic hurt us."

Mihalko is retired now. He worked for the state Health Department Emergency Medical Services for more than 30 years. In college, he studied for a career as a respiratory therapist.

Pino is a 50-year member of the fire company and served as fire chief for 16 years - the longest tenure in the company's history. He gave credit to Mihalko as the person who initiated the company's EMS training program.

"He was our EMS guy, starting out in the '70s. I was fire chief at the time, and he's the one that kind of got us kick-started and pointed in the right direction," Pino said.

"I think we provide a really good service today. Over the years, we morphed into basic service, advance service. We had an ambulance for a while, then we discontinued the ambulance service and we went with a commercial service. The idea was to



Clockwise: Adams Fire Co. President Jim Mihalko, a 48-year member; and Second Assistant Chief Robert Pino, a 50-year member, discuss fire company changes, challenges and achievements the company has experienced. • From left, Adams Fire Co. firefighters Robin Zastrow and Dave Mesler and Fire Co. President Jim Mihalko mark the company's 100th anniversary in front of their company truck during a day of awards, memories and milestones at the Saturday, April 20 celebration. • Adams Fire Col Vice President Amy Zastrow, Capt. Stephanie Sweeney and EMS Capt. Amy Orlowski are part of the group of women firefighters who have diversified and strengthened Adams Fire Co. through their dedication to helping the community.

provide the best service to the people we serve."

Mihalko and Pino said the company has evolved to meet the changes in the Town of Wheatfield.

"Our community has really evolved from a very rural community to - now we're the new Amherst," Mihalko said. "Because people can live in our district vs. the Elliott Creek, and their taxes are a third of their taxes, but you have the same amenities - good schools, you got good sewer, water electric, good housing. So, we've seen a lot of people move into our fire district, because our fire district still has a lot of open land for people to build and continue to build. There's a proposed new subdivision of 300 new homes coming in - that's another 300 customers to serve."

Pino pointed out that the district was the recipient of 300 to 400 senior apartments - populated by older residents who require more services than most people.

"We're just there to provide for them - whatever their needs are," he said.

There are about 75 patio homes in the Adams fire district, as well as Northgate Manor, a 200-bed nursing home. The company also covers more than 100 units of assisted living and about 75 units of memory care.

He said that, around 2006, Adams Fire Station 2 was built "to better serve that section of our area where a lot of that building was going on. And it's worked out real well for us with our membership because it was

kind of hard-to-get people to join if they're 5 or 6 miles away from the fire-hall."



There was a dual benefit, Pino said. "Not only did we increase our membership, but we spread out our resources so that we can better reach the people that we need to get to."

Amy Zastrow, Stephanie Sweeney and Amy Orlowski

Amy Zastrow is vice president of Adams Fire Co. and previously served as fire company secretary. She is a lifetime member of the company, having served 32 years. She said that, when she joined, there were only three other women in the company.

She works for SUNY Brockport as a secretary.

Zastrow has family in the company - her husband, Ross, and her brother are members, as well as family member Robin Zastrow. But she also has a different definition

of family for her fellow firefighters.

"It's a family - I have to say, we are a big family," Zastrow said. "My great uncle was a founding member of Bergholz Fire Co., and now my nephew belongs to that. And my dad had done a short stint at that fire company also. So, it must be in our blood."

She said being a part of the fire company means a lot to her: "I love it. I have a lot of pride for the Town of Wheatfield. It's my home; it's where I grew up. Even though I don't live there now, I still come back. I just did 12 years of volunteering for Tri-Community (Ambulance Service), which is in the Town of Wheatfield." She said her husband "breathes and lives this stuff. He worked for the state EMS Bureau, overseeing ambulance services for 20 years."

"It's such a good feeling to help somebody, and I think that's why we do it," Zastrow said. "I get a joy out of it." She added, "It's so hard when it's somebody that you know - a family member. It happened the night my father passed away. When it's that, it's a totally different scenario."

Zastrow said that, outside the fire company, people don't always understand the pull toward volunteering.

"I wish more people would understand or see it," she said. "You try to bring the public in, like with open houses and the Santa Claus drive that we do. But I don't think they really see we are a family. ... We back each other up, no matter what."

Capt. Stephanie Sweeney also is following tradition.

"I'm actually a third-generation firefighter," she said. "My father was a chief in Lancaster Fire Department, and his father - my grandfather - was a firefighter in Depew. My husband and I bought

a house in Wheatfield and I knew I wanted to help. I wanted to do something and be a part of something bigger."

"So, I wanted to make sure I was settled, because when I join I wanted it to be like, 'This is where I'm going to stay.' And so, once I had my son and things kind of calmed down a little bit - because you know how it is with little ones - I'm all right. Now's the right time."

Zastrow was sworn in in 2019. Her day job is working as a paralegal in an office.

As to what being a firefighter means to her, Zastrow said, "It means everything. I love being the person to run in when it might be instinct of everyone else to run away. We're here to help. I love when people see us coming, like, 'Help is here.'"

EMS Capt. Amy Orlowski also has had family in the company. Two of her cousins belonged to Adams Fire Co., and both are now North Tonawanda firefighters.

"My mother passed away when I was 12 years old, and Adams came to the house," she said. "I didn't obviously think about it then."

But she said that, years later, she did. One of her cousins got her a job where he worked, at the American Medical Response (AMR) ambulance service in Buffalo. That job was a pathway for Orlowski to focus on the field of emergency medical service, then bring her skills to volunteer work at the fire company.

"I started my career there," she said. "I got my foot in the door with EMS. I was the VST - the vehicle service technician - so I would stock the ambulances, get the crews ready for their shift."

She was around paramedics and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) all the time during 12-hour shifts.

Orlowski said she trained and was certified as an EMT in February of 2020. After working at AMR for several years, she joined Adams Fire Co. in 2018.

Orlowski has been an EMT captain at Adams for about three years.

"Every month, I'll put on an EMS drill," she said.

Orlowski checks the EMS bags to make sure the medications are up-to-date and that all the needed supplies are there so the crew is ready to go "when those tones drop."

In her off-hours from the fire company, she works with a car auction, ADESA, in Akron.

The training and her life experiences prepared and motivated her to help others through volunteer service with the fire company.

"So, part of them coming to help me in my time of need when my mother passed and helping my father out - just seeing that, as I was growing up and then just wanting to help people," in their time of need - that was Orlowski's context for joining Adams. "They were there for me, so I wanted to pay it back."

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