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Whippany fireman has strong ties

Keena: 'After 50 years, it kind of gets in your blood.'

BY VIDYA PADMANABHAN
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Monday, January 28, 2008

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HANOVER -- Over the 50 years that John Keena has been a volunteer member of the Whippany Fire Department, much has changed, and much has stayed the same.

His pride was obvious as he showed off his beloved firehouse on a recent Thursday. He pointed out the four gleaming trucks parked on the first floor and the rows of firefighters' gear, both fitted with modern safety devices. Upstairs is the meeting room that has hosted church services, township committee meetings and the local library at various times since the construction of the firehouse in 1923.

But it's more than pride alone that brings Keena to the firehouse nearly every day.

"After 50 years, it kind of gets in your blood," he said.

Keena's full head of hair -- silver though it may be -- and his knees belie his 78 years. He leapt into a truck and darted up several times during a conversation to show off features he particularly admired.

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John Keena stands in front of the Whippany firehouse, which has been a second home for him for 50 years. He spent those years working his way up the ranks of the department, all the way to chief.

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He pointed out a compressed air foam system, which eliminates the need for much water in fighting blazes; "Scott packs," breathing devices stowed away behind every seat; Jaws of Life, extrication devices attached to the truck; and a telescoping light that come up off the roof of the truck to light up nighttime scenes.

He reminisced fondly about past trucks -- in particular, a 1934 Seagrave 12-cylinder and a Mack.

"You get sentimental about some of the trucks," he said. "And I love this old building. But the most important thing here is the people. You get very close with your comrades. Even if you don't get along, you don't hold a grudge. They depend on you, you depend on them."

Keena was born in Madison before moving to Whippany when he was 8. He was the only child in his family who was born in the United States. All of his siblings were born in Ireland, where his father was a firefighter. Keena recently made a pilgrimage to his father's old firehouse in Dublin, he said.

While being the son of a firefighter was a definite motivation, Keena had also bought into a general fascination with firefighting that prevailed among boys when Keena was growing up, he said. He had two good friends who were firefighters. At the time, firefighting was so popular that there was a quota system to be a volunteer firefighter, he said.

He had served in the Army from 1947 to 1951, and joined the Chubb group of insurance companies to earn a living. Simultaneously, he also rose up the ranks as a volunteer firefighter, serving as lieutenant, captain, and then chief from 1971 to 1974. He has been the secretary and the president, and now is the vice president.

"Everything but the treasurer," he said, grinning. "I don't think they trust me."

The three paper mills in town had provided several moments of excitement over the years, he said. There had even been fires that had lasted for a couple of days, he said. "Any time there's a fire in a paper mill, it's going to be a hard one."

He also remembered the 1970s fire that burned down the historic Martin House, where General Lafayette is said to have dined while visiting George Washington in Morristown.

The only time he had been injured on duty was when he had stepped on a board with an exposed nail while checking a cellar after a fire, he said somewhat sheepishly. He had stayed down there for a while, trying to kick off the board.

"I didn't want to walk out like that," he said, laughing. "They made me go to Morristown Memorial for a tetanus shot."

More than the occasional excitement, what kept longtime members coming back was the camaraderie, he said. Members of the fire company cooked Christmas dinners from scratch in the tiny kitchen upstairs, he said. They couldn't afford a firehouse dog, so they kept a rubber fish. From a trophy cabinet in the meeting room, he pulled out a limp, vivid green specimen, Lucky, that someone had adorned with a rope

leash.

The meeting room is called Charlie's Room after Charlie Coughlan, one of the few firefighters who have been with the company longer than Keena. Coughlan was born a year before the company was formed in 1915, a proclamation on the wall of the room said.

Of the senior members, Keena is about the only one who still goes out on calls, he said. He doesn't go into the fires, or drive. But he is the "accountability" man, the person responsible for keeping tabs on the men who go into the fires, and monitoring their air time.

"I don't like to do it, but you do it anyway," he said. "This way, I can still make myself useful. When I can't do that anymore, I won't go anymore."

He also mentors members of the department such as Michael Goldberg, who are just starting out.

"He shows us another perspective on doing things," said Goldberg, a volunteer, as he sat with a group of his fellow firefighters in a small room beyond a pool table. "It helps us out a lot."

"We should cast you in bronze and put you out front, John," said Josh Makowski, a senior fire inspector.

"We should do him in platinum," Goldberg chimed in.

"He's as active today as he was 30 years ago," said Frank DeMaio, a fire commissioner. "You wish you had a whole company like him. Instead, we got a company like this," he said, waving at a grinning audience.

Keena has four sons, 10 grandchildren, three step-grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Only one of his sons briefly tried firefighting, he said.

"Then he started going out with girls, and that was the end of it," he said.

On the other hand, all of his sons had inherited musicality from his father, a talent that had skipped his generation, he said.

He had known his wife, Susan, all his life, and has been married to her for 57 years.

She had been very supportive of his dedication to the fire department, he said.

"She's a good fireman's wife," he said. "It hasn't been easy for her, especially when the boys were younger. I try to make it up to her every way I can."

The next milestone he looks forward to is the fire department's centennial in 2015, he said. "Hope I'm around for that," he said. "It'll be a very good celebration."

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Chief John Keena, a Gentleman and Great Neighbor

Mon Jan 28, 2008 4:11 pm

Congratulations Chief John Keena on celebrating your 50th anniversary as a member of the Whippany Volunteer FD. I am proud to have known you and Susan and your sons for some of these years as your neighbor and you as the consummate gentleman that you are. I am glad my brother is still calls you his neighbor. May you continue to enjoy your golden years and that thick mane of silver hair. My best to you and yours. I'll take a swing by when the weather warms in my old black roadster.

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