

Whippany fire department a community within itself

Close-knit brotherhood works together even when not fighting fires

BY JENNA M. MCKNIGHT

DAILY RECORD

HANOVER — Growing up, Joe Cortright spent countless days hanging around the Whippany firehouse, washing pumper trucks, scrubbing floors and pitching in wherever else he was needed.

His boyhood dream was to be a firefighter. Both his father and grandfather served for decades on the Whippany fire department — his father is a former chief — and the young Cortright aspired to follow in their footsteps.

Today, Cortright, now 36, is still hard at work inside that same two-story, red brick building on Route 10.



After officially joining the department at the age of 16, Cortright was hired in 2002 to be chief of the fire company, which is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year. The department had a party Saturday to commemorate its lengthy history and to christen new equipment.

The department has four paid employees and about 50 active volunteer firefighters, including two women.

Members say they joined because they want to serve the community. In the process, they've discovered that this fire department, like most, is a community within itself, one comprised of an eclectic mix of characters whose relationships go far beyond fighting fires, handling car accidents and responding to other emergencies.

Members regularly come together for softball games and fishing trips and Christmas dinners. They help each other with house repairs. And when a firefighter is moving into a new home, it's easy to round up a few helping hands at the

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firehouse, said Bob Krygoski, a 45-year-old Whippany native who joined the department when he was 18.

"The guys are all really tight down there," he said. "It's like a big family. There's a lot of camaraderie."

Spouses and children are brought into the fold, as well.

Helping the Mihalkos

Most recently, members have been assisting the widow of Tony Mihalko, who died in May at 66 after battling an illness.

Mihalko, who joined the department in 1968, was in the midst of renovating his family's house when he passed away. In July, fellow firefighters spent a Sunday afternoon redoing the landscaping at his home. They've helped with indoor repairs, too.

"He was somebody everybody looked up to," said Fire Inspector Ian Bell, who works full-time for the company. "Even though he's gone, his family is not forgotten."

Bell, a native of Scotland, said he joined the fire company in 1974.

"I got my citizenship in order to join," he said. "It's definitely a brotherhood. I've been on for 31 years. I've seen people come and go, but most people stay. There is a distinct closeness."

The old firehouse

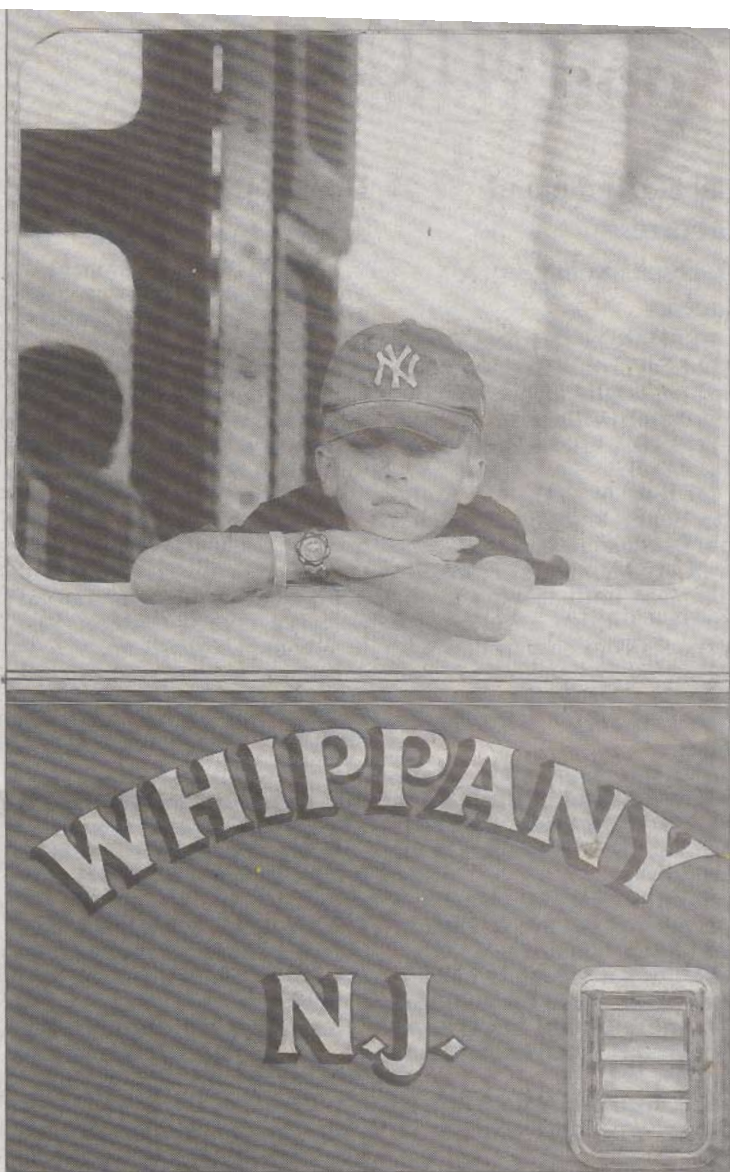
At the heart of this community is the fire house, built in 1923. Township residents helped fund construction through a "buy-a-brick" campaign — and the bricks were made in town at a now-defunct brickyard.

"The original building here is actually made from bricks from the brickyard here in town," Cortright said.

The department shared the building for decades. At one point, the second story was used by a school, along with the township committee before there was a town hall. And the Whippanong Library was housed up there for years, until the late 70s or early 80s, members said.

Today, the second floor is a meeting room, dedicated to the department's longest-serving, living member, Charlie Coughlan, a 91-year-old who still attends the department's monthly meetings.

Chief Joe Cortright said the firehouse has been expanded over the years. In 1958, the department added a sizable



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Aaron Dennis checks out the view from the new Whippany fire truck during Saturday's wetdown at Brickyard Park.

Inside, the walls of the firehouse are adorned with framed pictures of firefighters marching in parades, raising money for burn victims, snuffing out blazes.

The photos chronicle the department's history and depict a spirit of dedication and camaraderie.

"We all work together," said Fire Inspector Paul Perrello, 29. "It's like a brotherhood."

Like a brotherhood

Members often hang around the firehouse, which has a lounge and kitchen, when they're not on duty. They have a

key and can pop in whenever they want, Cortright said.

"There have been times they sleep on the couch," he said. "It's a place where you can sit and watch TV all night long. It's basically a second home."

And it's a home he doesn't plan to leave anytime soon.

"I hope to be here until I retire," Cortright said. "I love the town, I love the job. It's a great place to be. It's enjoyable to get up in the morning and come to work."

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