

The Fire of Enthusiasm



“There’s more to fire fighting than just putting the wet stuff on the red stuff,” Blackstone Assistant Fire Chief Alter Mac Osborne quipped a few days before Saturday’s annual Southside Fireman’s Contest in Kenbridge.

Blackstone firemen had been cleaning trucks for a parade and contest for three nights that week. Their 1,000 gallon pumper had been best in its class for two years and they had a trophy to defend. The men readily acknowledge that they seldom placed in the team competitions—but when it came to equipment, Blackstone had enthusiasm!

But annual contests are only once a year. What gets the man up on a run for that 2 a.m. fire call that turns out to be steam from a clothes dryer? And what keeps resentment from smoldering in the nagging fatigue that plagues them the next day?

Every fire call is a contest for volunteer firemen, a contest with the clock and with themselves. The men leap from a dead sleep to wide awake in ten seconds and in three minutes the first truck is rolling out the station. To reduce the time further, the men would have to sleep in the station. Maintaining this response time, one of the best in Southside, depends on enthusiasm, Osborne said.

But just like a real fire, enthusiasm can get out of control. What keeps the firemen, especially the younger one, from letting this enthusiasm break windows and doors unnecessarily and ravaging a house and its possessions with too much “wet stuff?” Again enthusiasm. But this time an enthusiasm to be professional.

“Try before you pry,” said Osborne, who as training officer always carries a handy supply of quotes to train his crew. He explained how powerful enthusiasm is when it mixes with adrenaline. “I’ve moved stuff at fires an later couldn’t image how I moved that thing.”

He pulled out a recent letter to the newspaper that praised Blackstone firemen for being so careful with the property they were trying to save. “We take pride in not getting crazy at a fire,” he said, as proud of this as he was of the trophy winning pumper.

But what keeps this precious flame burning steady like a stove’s pilot light? Enthusiasm cannot burn without the natural gas of community support. And for the firemen community appreciation means, among other things, reliable equipment.

But the oxygen necessary for enthusiasm to burn brightly comes from the fire itself. “I hate to say this,” Osborne reluctantly admitted, “but volunteer firemen need fires to keep their enthusiasm up. When the fire alarm sounds, you drop everything.”

What exactly do the men drop? As if propelled by an explosive, the men jump from their ordinary concerns with family and job into the extraordinary intense moment of a fire—which seems to burn time itself. Everything in the fireman’s mind but the fire and putting it out is consumed. Energies are focused like water from the hoses they point. Self-interest is forged into team work. The fire calls men to rise above themselves and become more than they thought they could be.

With nothing but their training, their equipment and their courage, the men approach the abyss that is their own potential, circle the fire, and advance...with enthusiasm.