

# 110TH ANNIVERSARY: PHILMONT VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY

BY MAARIKA POLIKARPUS

ON A FREEZING DAY TWO YEARS AGO, Max Dannis was driving with his daughter through the flurrying snow, when he had to slow for an accident. Firefighters were directing traffic, collars pulled up against the bitter winds, eyes squinting against the cold. I would be thankful to be warm and safe in my car. Dannis signed up.

He joined the thirty-one active members of the Philmont Volunteer Fire Company, which serves an area slightly larger than the village itself. Dannis and his wife Linda Gatter own and operate Local 111, a new restaurant on Main Street, just across from the firehouse, which is handy.

Robert Vivas, another firefighter, who owns the gun store down the street, says, "On weekdays, Max and I are it, except for the dinosaur squad." Vivas means the retired members of the company, who are around during the day, during the week. It's a problem. Most working-age firefighters work outside of the village, in other towns, even in other counties. On the other hand, they're happy to get out of bed at 3 am, when their beepers go off.

Why?

Richard Howard, Second Assistant Chief, who has spent 55 years as a firefighter—30 in Philmont, and before that, 25 in Hudson—has an answer.

"I love it." What does he love about it? "Everything."

To run towards a fire instead of away from it is counterintuitive. What separates those who do from those who won't? According to Dannis, fear is not a factor. "Firefighters, by nature, tend to seek out physical danger. We all want to go rushing into burning buildings and be heroes. The training makes us think twice before we do, and also think about how we do it."

"You're sound asleep," says Vivas. "You hear the tones go off, you jump into your clothes, you jump into your vehicle, and you still don't know whether you're going to a false alarm or the real thing. It's very, very exciting."

Not knowing what you're getting into may be exciting, but Chris Carlsen, First Assistant Chief, says it's also "extremely" dangerous. "They teach you hypotheticals in class, but when you get to the real thing, there are so many variables. If you don't follow the rules—simple things like not opening a hot door—you can kill yourself." Carlsen has been a volunteer of one kind or

another—EMT, police officer, firefighter—since he was 16. He's 48 now.

Maybe the men who ride the fire trucks were the boys who ran after the trucks, grown up.

Vivas likes to say that he joined because he likes fast driving and fire groupies, and, oh, yes, firefighting. "It turns out we don't really drive that fast and I've encountered only one groupie," says Vivas, who then gets serious. "I own a business in Philmont and I have a stake in the village. And I'm a former Marine, so I wanted to be part of a group that had a command structure and a mission."

Like the ex-Marine, most Philmont firefighters are men, although there is one woman away at school—Chris Carlsen's daughter, Emily—and one brand-new recruit—Tracy Brennan. Whatever their motivation, or their gender, it's a good thing, because they get paid exactly nothing. Like all the fire departments in Columbia County, the Philmont Volunteer Fire Company is just that. It has to be. Small villages and towns can't afford career firefighters, and, like Albert Brousseau says, "You're not going to buy fire trucks with pancake breakfasts."

Brousseau adds that he "got a big kick out of the quote in the New York Times after the January (1977) fire at High Rock Mills." The paper gushed, incredulously, "There were two hundred men on the scene to fight the fire, and not one was paid."

But the perspective of the Times was Chief José Ortiz's perspective too. "I grew up in Brooklyn. There was a firehouse every few blocks. They were career firemen. When I came to Philmont, I assumed there was a fire department. One afternoon, I was coming home from work, and I saw their blue truck. I found that interesting, a blue fire truck. I met the chief, Carroll Dallas, who told me they were volunteers. I said 'You mean that if my little house on the hill catches fire, I have to wait for you to jump out of your La-Z-Boy and come up here.' He said 'Yes, and it all depends on what time of the day it is.' Then he handed me an application."

Ortiz was "surprised to find out that just about every guy I worked with was also a fireman. And it hit me." Ortiz takes a breath, and says, with real feeling and without irony, "This is the spirit of America." Given the fact that it was Benjamin

Franklin who organized the first volunteer fire department in Philadelphia, and that nearly 75% of the firefighters in the U.S. are volunteers, he's not wrong.

Brousseau, a 36-year-veteran of the department, says it's time for the next generation to step up, or rush in, as it were, but getting young people to volunteer is a big problem. It has to do at least partly with time, which, in spite of everything about modern life that is supposed to be easier and go faster, seems shorter, while the hours needed to become a firefighter are longer. For safety reasons, the state regularly increases the requirements for training. "I think the hours are almost double what they were when I came in," says Brousseau, adding to Carlsen's point that it now takes two incomes to support a family, so there's less time all around.

Fifteen hours a month is about the average commitment, although it varies widely, and the chief and other officers put in closer to sixty. And that's not including calls. Training takes up much of that time. "I'm an interior-rated firefighter," says Vivas, "which means I'm qualified to enter burning buildings and fight fire from inside. The course ran for three months—two nights a week, four hours a night—and that was just the beginning." Basic training is 79 hours, and then there are electives—Rescue, Hazardous Materials, Arson Awareness, more. Most require both class work at the firehouse, and hands-on at a nearby training tower.

Volunteers are evaluated by a physician and categorized from Class A to E, and there's a place for anyone who has time. Dannis remembers his training fondly, although he was surprised at the number of hours spent on hands and knees. "When you're looking for victims, who are, most likely, unconscious, you want to stay below the smoke level and away from the heat, so you crawl." Vivas says the real reason firefighters run into a burning building is because they know what to do once they get inside.

What's left of a volunteer's hours, after the training, and the calls, are spent teaching fire safety and prevention at Taconic Hills School, and marching in the inevitable parades. As for the Chief, he says that most of his time is spent on "endless paperwork" but he recently spent half the night babysitting a live wire damaged by high winds, at the top of Summit Street.

Philmont was lucky enough to recruit two or three very young people this year, but two or three won't replace a whole company. Ortiz says "It goes deeper than lack of time. We need to foster the idea of civic duty within our kids."

Virtually every Philmont volunteer firefighter I talked to echoed Robert Vivas's wish to be "an active part of the community." Admittedly, they are all of a certain age, and many come from elsewhere. For Dannis, the Fire Company was one way to integrate himself into a community he wasn't born into. Dannis and his family came from New York City four years ago, Vivas came from Westchester three years ago, and Ortiz, from NYC, in 1990.

It may be the prevalent attitude at the firehouse, but it isn't necessarily the prevailing attitude in our country, or even in our town, and it may be dying with other traditional American values. The word "community" defines expanding, and overlapping, concentric circles—family, neighbors, village, town, county, state and country, and, ultimately, the family of man, but, although technology and globalization appear to bring us together, what really happens is that we're often isolated from the family next door.

Maybe the best way to instill a sense of duty in us kids of the computer age is via the internet. Bob Vivas keeps a blog on his firefighting adventures:

"Out of the hundred or so calls we get a year, *maybe* two are honest-to-god, full-blown, smoke-shooting-out-the-windows fires," writes Vivas, who goes on to describe his very first structure fire:

"You could see the glow from a quarter of a mile away, and you could smell it from half a mile away. We're the first truck on the scene. I'm first off the truck and I'm just standing there for a second staring at this house totally engulfed by flames and I think to myself, 'Why didn't I just join the police department?' Suddenly, somebody drops about fifty feet of hose on my shoulder, smacks me on the back of my helmet and yells 'Go!' And I go. I charge right into it."

Talk about trial by fire.

FIREPEOPLE



SEPTEMBER 11, 2006. MELLENVILLE CEMETRY.  
9/11 VIGIL.  
A.B. Shaw Fire Chief Ned Keeler and Stephen Keeler.



JULY 29, 2006. MAIN STREET PHILMONT.  
COLUMBIA VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION PARADE.  
Chris Hemmings, Max Dannis, and Frank Langdon  
(Philmont Volunteer Fire Company).



JULY 29, 2006. MAIN STREET PHILMONT.  
COLUMBIA VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION PARADE.  
Jeffrey Hotaling and Morgen Bowers  
(Churchtown Fire Company).



OCTOBER 7, 2006. A.B. SHAW FIREHOUSE, CLAVERACK.  
Alex Schultz of Reno, Nevada.



JULY 29, 2006. MAIN STREET PHILMONT.  
COLUMBIA VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION PARADE.