

Looking for a few good Havens'



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- By A column by John Anderson

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Wellsville, N.Y.

Each year around this time, I'm asked to write a story for as part of April's Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment Month. I'm asked to let the public know the advantages of volunteering in New York as part of the fire service.

Aside from paid city departments in Hornell and Olean, everyone operates a hall, trucks, equipment and turnout gear on a volunteer level.

As I was thinking about how to help in the efforts this year, one of the best firefighters, one of the best department members and one of the most trusted men I know, passed away. Gary Havens.

During my time as secretary with the Grant Duke Hose Company in Wellsville, the treasurer position opened up. No one wanted the thankless job, but Gary grabbed the ledger, the bank statements and a stack of mail that made me cringe and said, "Well, I guess I'll do it."

Sitting in the front row during this meeting, holding his 1960s-era company bylaws like they were the Bible with his equally old notepad and pen, was Gary's father, Art. As Gary took over as treasurer, Art cracked a smile for the first time at a meeting I could remember. Art knew what the rest of us knew: Spending would be done for the good of the department, the books were safe and we could now focus on buying a new truck.

All I knew about Gary was, teamed up with Steve Pettenati, they were the two most loved instructors at the technical school in Belmont — Steve teaching photography and computers, Gary teaching electrical trades. Two completely different subjects, two completely different people, but two guys who could make you laugh for hours.

And learn.

Sure enough, this electrical trades instructor knew his finances. He fretted once over the books being off by \$1. For all the huge dollars and quarters going through the

company monthly, it was amazing. Sure enough, the company bought a brand new truck under his watch.

However, something else happened each meeting.

As Art and some of the others in the company would go down a list of things needed to be done inside the fire hall, I would take notes for the monthly minutes and always come up with the answer: Gary's got it.

The wiring in the bathroom is bad. Gary said he can get to it on Tuesday. The generator in the bay is smoking. Gary will get to it Wednesday. The chicken barbecue pit grates need welding. Gary will bring them to BOCES on Thursday.

As for Friday and the weekend? It was common to see Gary with his children and, later, grandchildren, at the hall, watching TV then tinkering around, cleaning or making sure things worked. Checking the hoses on the truck. Kicking the tires. All that stuff I could never do.

Gary also took on the responsibility of the tanker, the brush buggy and later captain of the all-terrain vehicle used along with the brush buggy to fight fires in the woods or help rescue someone where a truck or ambulance can't get in. He maintained records and the equipment for the entire department.

Last month, Gary was concerned that pesky generator was causing too many fumes inside the bay and the building. He put in a safe outdoors box and moved the generator outside.

When you think of all the things Gary did, you think "I don't have time to do all of that."

Your fire department or company doesn't need "all of that." They need you to take on one job. That's it. Think of the small number of volunteers and how much they do. Every new member doing a little helps take pressure off the rest of the volunteers.

Gary was a family man first. And he also had time to volunteer in other capacities. He announced all of the Wellsville baseball games with who else? Steve Pettenati. Gary had a professional voice and professional delivery. He went from Wellsville High School to Vietnam and worked with his hands his whole life. I've taken years of broadcast journalism classes and studied some of the greats in the announcing world. Let me tell you, Gary was one of the best.

I am honored to have stolen many of his lines over the years. His delivery of "Ladies and gentleman at this time, would you please rise ... gentlemen remove your caps ... for the playing of our National Anthem," was delivered with such power it made you swell with pride as you looked at the flag waving and the anthem being played or performed. The way he announced the lineup going around the field, the way he asked for your attention, it made you feel special that he was announcing your event.

He also spent 24 nights for a few summers announcing Wellsville Nitros games. Again, being a volunteer firefighter did not get in the way of his family time, his work, preparing for classes or his other volunteer activities, like being the treasurer for the

Wellsville Alumni Association or helping with the clock at Wellsville and Alfred State football games.

Gary Havens is the reason you should consider becoming a volunteer firefighter. I don't remember him running into a burning building, but the department has a good core of guys who are trained to do that. Gary, like everyone else, was trained to do that. But someone needs to drive, someone needs to operate the pump, control a fire scene and 10 other things you don't notice.

Sit down with a piece of paper and list your employment history. Then, list your hobbies. Then, list things you are good at. List things you volunteer for; your strengths in school. You will be amazed at how many things you do that could be used if you were a volunteer firefighter.

Sure, there are a few financial incentives if you are a homeowner and a volunteer firefighter. And if the department continues to hit state mandates, your fire insurance taxes will go down. But there is an even bigger benefit. You will meet people from all walks of life and you will make new, trusted friends.

And if you are as lucky as I was, you'll meet a Gary Havens.

John Anderson is the regional editor of the Wellsville Daily Reporter.



Gary Havens, left, looks on at a fire with his father, Art, center, and son Tony, right. His son, Andrew, also was in the fire service and his grandson, Killian, made it four generations for a few years.

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