

Voices In My Head: When I Grow Up, I Want To Be A...

By P.J. O’Leary

My wife Leslie and I took advantage of the sumptuous breakfast served by the Vernonia Volunteer Firefighters at Vernonia Middle School/High School on May 18. The event was both a fundraiser and a call to Vernonians for additional volunteers.

While we’re all aware of the services the department provided during the flood, we tend to forget about the ongoing sacrifices which these folks and their families make in order to keep our community safe. Those among us who have experienced a fire or motor vehicle accident understand that these volunteers are the best friends you could ask for in an emergency.

Seeing all of the firefighters, many of whom I had worked with in my eight years as a volunteer, brought back some cherished memories. When I started with the department in 1995, there were three guys still serving who were legends. Gene Weller, Don Webb and Don Tiffney had spent most of their adult lives as Vernonia firefighters. These men provided novices like me with incalculable years of experience from which to draw. Gene, regrettably, is no longer with us, but both he and the Dons taught me unforgettable lessons about the value of mental clarity and patience in incredibly stressful emergency situations.

I never asked these guys how old they were, but I suspect that when they started fire was still a relatively recent invention. It’s possible that Neolithic patent lawyers were still hammering out the legal details. Don Webb used to tease me about my last name (you know, Chicago fire and all), but it never occurred to me that it might be such a fresh memory because he remembered reading the headlines. Seriously, if you see Don or Don downtown ask them what firefighting was like when Oregon was still a territory. I won’t belabor the point except to say that when they were in school the history book was a four-page pamphlet. I’ll shut up now because I know that either of the Dons could still toss me like fifty feet of dry hose.

Three Mondays a month we had drill, which typically was an evening of working with equipment and streamlining firefighting and MVA (motor vehicle accident) techniques. I can recall one evening when we were doing a practice burn on a condemned house on Columbia Avenue. Scott, who I believe was a Captain at the time, had agreed to be a live rescue victim in the burning house. We had come to know Scott as an invaluable member of the department, a fellow firefighter who with acquired knowledge and perseverance overcame the challenge presented by his prosthetic leg. As the smoke billowed and the interior heat began to increase, we went in as a team to search for and remove our victim. Doing stomach crawls through the smoke-filled house, we heard his voice and somehow dragged him to safety. Once we had all caught our breath he calmly mentioned that in the rescue effort we had pulled his leg off and left it inside the house. We immediately retrieved his leg, and while it was not an ideal rescue, we came away with consensus agreement that this result was preferable to saving the leg and leaving the rest of Scott inside. When it came to training, Scott was a really good sport. We may have actually pulled his leg off more than once, but never intentionally (as far as anyone will admit.)

I’m sure I could interview past and present firefighters and unearth hundreds of other stories, like the male members of the department who dressed in darkness when the pager went off and didn’t realize until their arrival at the station that they were wearing clothes which their wives had left near the bed.

If you’re looking for a way to contribute to the community, please consider service with Vernonia’s Volunteer Fire Department or EMT’s. The memories alone will last you a lifetime.

Safety Matters

By Chief Mathew Workman

The Vernonia Police Department participated in the 3-Flags Safety Enforcement Campaign from May 19th to June 3rd. During the campaign officers increased their vigilance in watching for safety belt violations, child safety seat violations, DUII’s, and general traffic safety issues. The overtime hours were paid for by ODOT grant funds.

Statewide crash fatalities and injury rates gave dropped 43% since the passage of the adult seatbelt law in 1990. Combined with active enforcement the seatbelt use rate has climbed to 95% (front seat) and 97% (all seating), which puts Oregon in the top five in seatbelt use in the United States. Oregon is #3 behind Hawaii (97%) and Washington (96%). The national average is 82%. Vernonia belt use is around 94% to 96% on average.

The focus of this year’s safety campaign is: 1) extension of belt laws to occupants of commercial vehicles “designed or used” to transport property, and 2) booster use for children over 40 pounds but under age 8yrs or less than 4’9” tall. ODOT has sent out a very helpful poster to determine what type of restraint or booster should be used with children depending on height, weight, and age. I have placed this poster on the wall by the front door of the police department.

For more information or assistance with selection and installation of child restraints and boosters you can call the Safety Seat Resource Center at 503-643-5620 or 1-800-722-1315 or visit www.childsafetyseat.org.

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