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— Lt. Tom Shurtliff,
training coordinator
Farmington Hills

Part time — not unprofessional, firefighters say

By Chris Rizk
staff writer

FIREFIGHTER JOHN SMITH works 10 hours a day, five days a week and has weekends off. He's competent, energetic and belongs to a union. He couldn't ask for anything more, except perhaps money, and he's happy with his work. And if he's happy, he's probably doing his job well.

Richard Jones is a paid, on-call firefighter. He works full-time at a job outside the city where he lives, but feels compelled to give some time to his community as a part-time firefighter. He can't always respond in an emergency but that doesn't diminish his capacity or his ability. He's happy with his work, in both cases, and he performs his jobs well.

The above scenarios are hypothetical and the names are not real. But in Farmington Hills, both situations could, and do, appear in what professionals here are calling a peaceful co-existence.

It is, said Lt. Tom Shurtliff of the Farmington Hills Fire Department, an indication that full-time and part-time fire staff can, and do, work to the benefit of the community, a theory that has its share of critics.

"We are all professionals and the level of execution of our jobs makes us professionals," said Shurtliff, the department's training coordinator. "Our part-time people are going to act just as competent and just as professional as someone who gets full-time pay to do a job."

LIKE MOST suburban fire departments, many of which operate with a

combination fire force, Farmington Hills is fast recognizing it's not the number of full-time professionals that determines the degree of competency, but the level of training that goes into preparing each firefighter for on-duty action.

In Farmington Hills, that level of training is apt to match that found in most full-time departments, Shurtliff said.

And, at least in Farmington Hills, each firefighter, whether full-time or on-call, has the opportunity to reach the highest level of certification — Firefighter II.

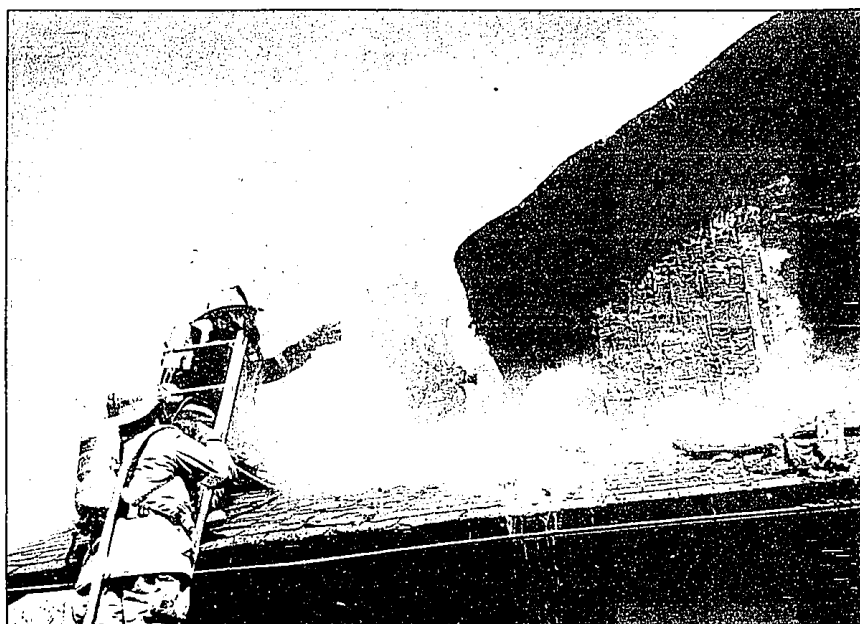
It's a combination of good management style coupled with what best suits the needs of the community that makes the mixture of firefighters work so well, Shurtliff said.

"If we don't manage ourselves properly, our valuable manpower will drop off. The on-call people will start to feel inadequate," he said. "In our case, the city council and the chief have decided that a combination department is where it's at."

WITH THE bulk of the department's runs occurring between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., a period when on-call members aren't likely to be available, the staffing has grown to accommodate full-time firefighters mainly during daytime hours.

Not everybody agrees with the combination-style department, including firefighters' unions. The unions argue the level of competency naturally drops whenever part-timers are used.

In a March 26 letter to the editor



Firefighters extinguish flames under an overhang on the roof of a two-story house during a March 22 training session near I-275

that ran in the Southfield Eccentric, James McRoberts, Southfield Firefighters Association president, suggested that since paid firefighters work in their profession 24 hours a day, "year in and year out . . . they learn to be expert at their job. They do not play at it."

The argument by unions that part-time members receive less training, Shurtliff said, is natural because "full-time people are endemic to the cause of the union."

"You certainly don't expect unions to favor part-time departments over full-time ones," he said.

Farmington Hills firefighters are required, according to the department's adherence to state guidelines, to receive at least 80 hours worth of training before ever stepping onto a fire truck, Shurtliff said.

Since there are no mandated levels of training required by the state for firefighter training, the most departments can do is institute their own requirements.

IN FARMINGTON HILLS, the move is to have all personnel at the highest level of competence, whether part-time or full-time.

After recruit training of 90 hours, done in-house by qualified, certified staff members, each recruit must obtain a Firefighter I certificate and complete emergency first aid training within 12 months of joining the department.

Firefighter I certification gives part-time, on-call personnel, as well as full-time members, 132 hours of training.

An additional 132 hours is required to attain the highest certification available, Firefighter II. This move is urged, but not required, by the state and the department, Shurtliff said.

"Because we want the most competent firefighters on staff, we aspire to train each to the level of Firefighter II," he said.

Shurtliff justifies his department's stance on the combination by pointing to the number of days each employee spends on continual training throughout the year.

"Considering the 'on-call' nature of the majority of the fire department,

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in Farmington Hills. From left are Ron Achtenberg of Farmington Hills, Bill Marken of Livonia and Tom Johnson of Novi.



Farmington Hills firefighter Alan Ruprecht, in full protective gear, carries a pike pole up a ladder to help with overhaul during the March 22 training session. The pole is used to pull apart objects.

Prevention

He spreads word on fire safety

By Chris Rizk
staff writer

Four years ago, Mike Garr, a Farmington Hills firefighter, showed Donald Duck films to relay lifesaving techniques to school children.

It was the only thing available and considered standard fare in fire education, he said.

Today — 200 viewings later — Garr has tossed out the familiar Disney feature and opted for a more realistic approach to teaching children about fire prevention.

"If there is nothing else they remember after my visit, I hope that this one thought gets across — If there's a fire, the only safe place to be is outside."

Garr, the Farmington Hills Fire Department's fire safety instructor, has taken his prevention-oriented crusade to schools in and out of Farmington Hills.

In an effort to raise the firefighter's image from one who is solely interested in battling fires to one who has a co-responsibility to promote fire prevention, he has run up against some hard-line firefighters as well as educators, who insist that firefighters belong in the heat of the blaze to be most effective.

"IT IS possible to educate the public," Garr said. "Maybe if we start young enough, those nursery, kindergarten and first-grade kids will recognize what I'm telling them after they've seen my program six or seven times at different grade levels."

While no statistics are available to judge prevention-oriented programs, proof of Garr's effectiveness can be seen each time a student returns home to practice his teachings.

"That's the hardest thing," he said. "The only measure of effectiveness is how well-ingrained the stuff I'm telling them becomes so that they respond appropriately when the time comes."

For some, the message becomes so ingrained that it can save a life.



Mike Garr is known as Firefighter Mike in Farmington Public Schools classrooms.

For Garr, it makes his job that much more rewarding.

When 6-year-old Ray Rudzki's clothing caught fire from an out-of-control campfire, the boy remembered to "STOP! DROP! ROLL!" to extinguish the flames.

He later told his family that he remembered to do so because "Firefighter Mike" told him during a school visit.

"I TELL them that they may not always be able to control their environment, but they can know what to do," Garr said. "In this case, it helped Ray."

Further proof of his talks are hitting home is the increase in attendance during the annual fire department open house.

Originally, the open houses attracted 400-500 visitors. Last year, 3,000 residents turned out. The increase is partly attributed to Garr's reaching school children, who, in turn, relay his messages to their parents.

"Anytime kids learn something

and take that home to their parents, it's bound to stimulate awareness," said Lt. Tom Shurtliff, the fire department's training coordinator. "Somehow, the messages came through, the light bulb went on and now we're seeing the response."

After spending the past four years educating the public, Garr has begun to expand his interests.

The nine-year veteran of fighting fires is involved with helping other fire departments begin or strengthen their educational programs. He hopes to encourage educators to pick up where he leaves off.

"IT'S HARD to reach everyone when there is just one person, but if we could make this a cooperative effort on the part of the tri-county area, we would be creating a challenge to departments to work in a prevention mode," Garr said.

"You have to think of a fire as a failure. It doesn't matter that you put it out in a certain number of minutes. We have to say that never should have happened."

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