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70 years on call: Hamlin Township Fire Department marks milestone

From telephone trees to modern emergency response, Hamlin firefighters have served the township since 1956

BY LOIS TOMASZEWSKI

SHORELINE MEDIA EXECUTIVE EDITOR

HAMLIN TWP. — When Steve VanderVest joined the Hamlin Township Fire Department in April 1980, the department was already nearly 25 years old.

More than four decades later, VanderVest is its chief. During his time with the department, equipment and training have changed and firefighters have taken on more responsibilities.

Today's Hamlin firefighters respond not only to fires, but also medical emergencies, crashes, water emergencies and searches across a township that includes Hamlin Lake, Lake Michigan shoreline, wooded areas and Ludington State Park.

This year, the department is marking 70 years of service.

Hamlin Township officials recognized the milestone in February. VanderVest has served since 1980. Capt. Den VanderVest joined in 1982, while Assistant Chief Tom Johnson and Lt. Matt Bryant joined in 1996.

Together, the four represent more than 150 years of fire service.

Hamlin Township established its fire department in 1956, during a period when organized rural fire protection was expanding across Mason County.

By the early 1970s, Hamlin Township Fire Chief William "Bill" Sadler was also serving as Mason County fire chief.

When Branch Township organized its fire department in 1971, it received a

1951 Ford-American LaFrance engine previously used by Hamlin Township. According to the Mason County Rural Fire Authority's history, Sadler delivered the truck to Branch.

Fire dispatch was considerably different then.

Rosalyn "Rosie" Sadler, Bill Sadler's widow, recalled in a 2025 profile that she helped summon Hamlin firefighters through a telephone tree when an emergency was reported. While Bill prepared equipment and firefighters, Rosie helped spread the word that there was a call.

Countywide radio paging arrived in the early 1980s, replacing a system that had depended heavily on telephones and, in some communities, fire sirens.

By then, VanderVest was a member of the department.

Mason County's rural fire departments also began responding to medical emergencies in the early 1980s to assist ambulance crews, while firefighter training requirements increased.

Hamlin firefighters today cover residential and rural areas, forests, Hamlin Lake and Ludington State Park. Calls can range from structure and wildland fires to medical emergencies, crashes, searches and water-related incidents.

Fire protection in the county changed again in the mid-1990s when Mason County ended its longstanding financial role in local fire protection.

Hamlin Township, Pere Marquette Township and the city of Ludington formed the Western Mason County Fire



District in 1996. The district helps fund major equipment purchases, while the municipalities remain responsible for operating their individual departments.

Federal grants awarded to Hamlin in 2007 and 2008 helped purchase protective equipment, a thermal-imaging camera, breathing apparatus and related equipment.

Some of the department's members have served through decades of those changes.

VanderVest joined in 1980 and Den VanderVest in 1982. Johnson and Bryant followed in 1996. Other longtime members include Mike Cooper, who joined in 2000; Andy Larr in 2007; and Liz Reimink in 2011.

At the township's February anniver-

sary recognition, officials noted the department had 14 members. VanderVest was recognized for 45 years of service, while Johnson and Bryant were recognized for 31 years each.

There are still pieces of the department's early history to fill in, including the names of its founding firefighters, its first chief and details about its first station and apparatus.

What began as a rural fire department in 1956 now responds to a much broader range of emergencies.

The equipment and methods have changed during those 70 years, from telephone trees to modern communications and emergency equipment. The reliance on local firefighters to answer those calls has not.

published by
**SHORELINE
MEDIA**
LUDINGTON DAILY NEWS
OCEANA'S HERALD-JOURNAL
WHITE LAKE BEACON

Ludington Daily News

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White Lake Beacon

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Interim Publisher: Paul Heidbreder

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News:

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Circulation:

Jerriann Steiger

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A closer look at David Holden's role in steering Mason County through emergency situations

BY SHANNA AVERY
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Since being hired as Mason County's new Emergency Manager in January, David Holden has pushed full steam ahead in coordinating with public safety and emergency services, as well as other entities, to make sure plans are in place to face local disasters head-on.

Holden offers a closer look into the daily tasks as well as larger-scale planning his position involves, and with almost a year handling the local emergency management position, he said things have been going well.

"There's been so much to learn about this job, in part because you have information coming in every which direction, whether it's communicating with police, fire or the state and occasionally at the federal level, and figuring out how to organize all of those data streams coming at you," he said, explaining part of the involvement is figuring out what needs to be prioritized.

He also works with civilian agencies such as the Red Cross, or partnering with local churches and other entities as locations for emergency shelters.

Holden described some of the dynamics unique to Mason County.

"It's a bit more of a rural area, so sometimes you don't have the resources that some of the larger cities have, like Grand Rapids or Ann Arbor or Lansing. So in my office it's really just me and my assistant who functions largely as a secretary. When I was down in Lansing for training, they had a dozen people in there, but obviously they have a lot more people there. We only have around 30,000 in Mason County, so it is sub-

stantially smaller," he said. "And also in these more rural areas, people are a bit more independent and a lot of people might have well water and back up generators already, so in some instances they might be able to weather storms a little bit better than those in the city."

He explained the emergency services in Mason County, such as the police and fire departments, do a phenomenal job with responding to immediate conflicts and disasters.

"My job involves more connecting. If a disaster is just a day, most of the stuff they can handle without my involvement, but if a disaster goes several days or weeks, for example, the ice storm that hit Traverse City and knocked out that city for several months, leaving some several weeks without power, so when something like that happens, that's where the emergency manager really plays a large part in bringing in resources from the state and federal government to help the local government meet the needs of the people," he said.

Holden reflected on all the flooding this past spring.

"We were so fortunate. My phone was blowing up because the emergency managers [from surrounding counties] were all gone off because they had flooding, and in fact I was down in training at one point and they're concerned because as they are training us, on the side they have have a camera watching the river, and we're watching it go up inches by inches every hour, and they got this red line here, and it got almost to it and it started to recede, but they were like if we hit this red line we're going to have to cancel class, because we're going to have to respond to this. So we were so

fortunate, really this last year, that outside of some minor washouts in the spring and occasional power losses, which are normal for winter, we avoided any major storms."

"I think it was in 86 and 2008 there were massive floods that hit this area. Hopefully I retire by the time anything like that happens," he joked. "I found a newspaper article and I opened it up and it was like a year's worth of rain in a month, so it's like God opens the heavens over you. Everything was washed out - unbelievable."

Holden discussed some of the planning he is currently working on, such as contracting for debris removal in advance.

I used to be a history professor," he said. "I taught at the Command and General Staff College, so I taught army officers and I taught them about military history, and the first day of class they'd be like, 'Ugh, history.' But by the end of the year they were like - 'History is so much fun.' But what made me think about that is when a historian says, 'I have something fun and interesting,' everyone is like, 'You know, how boring this can be.' So when I say 'exciting for emergency manager,' most people are going to be like, 'that doesn't



sound thrilling at all.' So if we take what happened in Traverse City and let's say God forbid that happens here, and you get an ice storm that just knocks power out for weeks, well, they have been trimming trees pretty aggressively this year, in part because what happened in Traverse City was they weren't near as aggressive up there trimming along the power lines, and when the storm hit, all the ice froze over the trees, and when they fell they landed on the lines and



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power went out everywhere.

"Well when that happens you have all the down trees, all the debris from that, all the damage from the ice storm and what do you do with all that debris? Well if you don't have debris removal set up in advance, it can take weeks for the machinery and trucks to show up to start removing that at that scale. If you have flooding and people have to tear out their carpet or the house is destroyed, where are they going to throw that - so if you don't have those systems set up, it just piles up outside and it's unsanitary and disease-ridden and bacteria."

Holden said it's been exciting interviewing debris removal companies, many from the south where they have experience dealing with hurricanes and flooding. He has been drafting requests for proposals, and once the contract is signed, if a disaster were to hit, they would have someone in Mason County in 12 hours. They would come by plane and examine the situation, and see what the response needs to be.

"In 72 hours they will have trucks up

here to start picking up material and debris from around our country and take care of it all. And that doesn't sound exciting, but when you're trying to get your life put back together and getting the city up and running as soon as possible, that's the difference in starting a 72 hour process or waiting two or three weeks before that can begin at scale. And so that's the kind of the stuff I'm looking at because the firemen and the sheriff got the stuff locked down, but for the recovery phase, if I don't come up with something, nobody is, so that's what I'm focusing on, because if something were to happen, we'd be ready to respond to the worst case scenarios," he added.

Holden said he also is looking at starting up reunification drills with the local schools again, which he said hasn't happened in a handful of years.

"Let's say something happens in the school and the sheriff and fire departments show up and they evacuate the schools. Well once they evacuate the schools, then all of those kids after evacuation have to be transported between

another site. Once at that site, they have to be reunified with their parents. In the process of reunifying parents and kids, it isn't straightforward because you have to account for these kids, especially if they are in elementary school. That's going to be hard to do because they have to match with their parents and in today's age maybe one parent can't pick them up and so you have to make sure the right parent is picking up the right kid and you have documentation of that and they can take them home. You have to account for them, so that process sounds simple, but in the chaos following some travesty happening in the school, that's hard to do because you don't know what the teachers will be doing, so linking parents and students is something you kind of have to rehearse.

"Coming from the military, I was in the infantry and I deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan and so you can have plans, put them in the binder, put them on a shelf, but if you don't rehearse those plans, it's a disaster. You have to rehearse these things, even occasionally,

and so you have institutional memory," he said.

Holden also works with businesses such as House of Flavors manufacturing, such as how to respond if there's a leak or a fire.

He said his military training has been an asset when it comes to preparing for emergencies. Holden joined the U.S. Army just a month before 9/11.

"Much of what I've done coming from the military is in fact many of the systems that emergency management uses structurally and organizationally and how they communicate, how they respond, most of that is drawn from the military and just reapplied," he said.

Reflecting on his first few months as emergency manager, Holden is confident and excited for the future.

"The one thing about my position is the amount of support I have gotten from the firefighters and sheriff's department, and especially the county commissioners. They've been so good to me, so helpful that it has been wonderful to work with them," he said.

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Still answering the call: After 50 years, Fred LaPoint continues a life of service

BY LOIS TOMASZEWSKI

SHORELINE MEDIA EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Long before Fred LaPoint wore a fire helmet, carried a paramedic license or commanded a fire department, he stood on a ballfield on the south side of Syracuse, New York, and watched firefighters arrive at a burning house.

He was 8 or 9 years old.

LaPoint and his brother had been playing baseball when they heard the trucks. A house a street away was on fire, with smoke pushing from its windows and a frantic woman in the yard.

What LaPoint remembers most is what happened when the firefighters arrived.

"From where I stood it should have looked like chaos — all that apparatus, all those men, arriving at once into somebody's worst moment," LaPoint said. "It did not. Within seconds it dissolved into something closer to a ballet."

Everyone seemed to know what to do.

"I was awestruck," he said.

Standing on that ballfield, LaPoint decided he wanted to become a firefighter.

More than 50 years in emergency services later, LaPoint is still answering the call.

Today, he is fire chief and a paramedic with the Stronach Township Fire Department in Manistee County. Along the way, he served in the U.S. Coast Guard, spent his career with the City of Manistee Fire Department and deployed more than three dozen times with Team Rubicon.

Why is he still doing it?

"Because the work is not finished, and because I am still useful," LaPoint said.

Somewhere, he said, someone is going to have the worst hour of their life. When that person calls for help, the outcome may depend on whether trained people arrive prepared.

"As long as I can still contribute to that — on the truck, at a patient's side, at a training night, or at a keyboard — I do not see a reason to stop."

Fifty years of change

LaPoint enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1972 and served through 1976 as a telephone technician second class, stationed at the Coast Guard electronics shop in Muskegon. Station Ludington was part of his regular duty area.

"I was in and out of Ludington long before I ever put on a fire helmet," he said.

The Coast Guard taught him a lesson he carried into firefighting: Don't wait for an emergency to discover whether equipment or training works.

"You do not find out whether something works when you need it," he said. "You find out beforehand, on purpose, under the worst conditions you can arrange."

Firefighting looked much different when LaPoint started in 1976.

Firefighters wore long coats and three-quarter rubber boots. There were no protective hoods, and exposed ears could become a crude gauge of when conditions were becoming too hot. Self-contained breathing apparatus existed, but wearing it wasn't always expected.

Today, firefighters enter structures with protective equipment, air packs, thermal imaging cameras and accountability systems. Knowledge about the cancer risks associated with smoke and soot has also changed how firefighters clean themselves and their gear after a fire.

"In 1976 the dirty coat was the trophy," LaPoint said. "You hung it in the back of your car and wore it to the next one. We were poisoning ourselves and calling it dedication."

How firefighters handle difficult calls has changed, too.

"We did not deal with them," LaPoint said of traumatic calls decades ago.

Firefighters cleaned the equipment, put the truck back in service and went home. Today, peer support and behavioral health resources are increasingly available, and younger firefighters are more willing to acknowledge when a call has





affected them.

Some calls have stayed with LaPoint.

One involved two young boys who died in a structure fire. LaPoint and one other firefighter were the first to arrive. He had children about the same age at home.

"I went home from that fire to a house with my own kids asleep in it," he said.

LaPoint doesn't claim that more firefighters would have changed the outcome. He said only that two firefighters cannot accomplish what four can during the critical first minutes of a fire.

His concerns about staffing predated that fire. During his career with the City of Manistee Fire Department, LaPoint served as vice president of the firefighters' union local and was involved in litigation over minimum staffing.

"When a community decides what it can afford in fire protection, it is not buying trucks," he said. "It is deciding how many trained people are going to come through the door in the first four minutes of the worst night of somebody's life."

Seventeen days

LaPoint retired from the City of Manistee Fire Department on July 2, 2019.

His retirement lasted 17 days.

For years, friends at the Stronach Township Fire Department had encouraged him to join. His answer had been to ask again after he retired.

On July 19, the call came.

"I could not refuse it," LaPoint said. "I am not sure I even considered refusing it."

He joined as a captain. In September 2021, the township board asked him to become chief.

"If there is a lesson in it for anybody, it is this: I did not choose to keep serving," LaPoint said. "I never stopped."

At Stronach, the chief may also be the administrator, grant writer, training officer and paramedic kneeling on someone's kitchen floor.

And there are few strangers.

"Here I know the name on the mailbox," LaPoint said. "I know whose grandmother that is."

LaPoint also has responded to disasters well beyond Manistee County. As a Team Rubicon volunteer, or Greyshirt, he has participated in more than three dozen deployments, including responses in Mozambique, Honduras, the Bahamas and Mexico. He also served as the organization's state administrator for Michigan.

Passing it along

These days, LaPoint also spends time writing about what he has learned from firefighting and emergency response.

"Fifty years of this leaves you holding a great deal of information that exists nowhere but in your head," he said.

"When a person with that kind of memory leaves the fire service without handing it over, it is simply gone," LaPoint said.

His writing also seeks to help the public understand fire and EMS services and the decisions affecting them.

"The public cannot weigh in on what it does not understand," he said.

LaPoint was the first firefighter in his family, but he wasn't the last.

His son Jordan became a firefighter and paramedic and served in that capacity in the Air Force. His stepson Spencer also served in the Air Force and has entered

the fire service.

"So the honest answer is that I have spent my entire life chasing something I saw on a summer afternoon before I was ten years old," LaPoint said, "and two young men I raised are chasing it now too."

His definition of a first responder has changed over those 50 years.

Sometimes, he said, the first responder is the wife performing CPR before an ambulance arrives, a neighbor pulling someone from a car or a teenager calmly giving a dispatcher an accurate address.

"It is the answer to a question a community has to keep answering," LaPoint said. "When it happens here, who moves?"

LaPoint has spent more than 50 years answering that question.

And he is still moving.

About Fred LaPoint: Fred R. LaPoint is fire chief and a paramedic with the Stronach Township Fire Department in Manistee County. A Coast Guard veteran and Team Rubicon disaster responder with more than three dozen deployments, he writes *Behind the Alarm*, a column focused on firefighting, emergency response and public education.



Chief McCarthy helps White Lake

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA STAFF WRITER

WHITEHALL — Pete McCarthy has spent more than two decades answering calls for help in the White Lake area, working his way from a paid on-call firefighter to chief of the White Lake Fire Authority.

“I started as a paid on-call firefighter in 2002,” McCarthy said.

Just two years into his career, McCarthy was involved in a rescue that earned him a Medal of Valor.

In October 2004, McCarthy was among five White Lake firefighters who responded after a pickup was driven into Duck Lake. The 26-year-old driver, from Calumet, was trapped inside the pickup.

Firefighters pulled the man from the cab and began CPR. The driver resumed breathing shortly after CPR began.

McCarthy and fellow firefighter Benjamin Novak received Medals of Valor for their actions. Jeff Holmstrom, Bruce Grabenstetter and Ray Cole Jr. received Medals of Gallantry.

The rescue came early in a career that would eventually take McCarthy through the ranks of the White Lake Fire Authority.

He became a paid sergeant in charge of public education and fire prevention in 2007.

“In 2010, I transitioned to full time as a first lieutenant,” McCarthy said. “In 2012, I became a full-time captain and training officer.”

When then-Chief Gregory Holman stepped away from the position in February 2020, McCarthy served as interim chief.

Four months later, the White Lake Fire Authority selected McCarthy as its new chief after interviewing 37 candidates. The authority board made the decision unanimously at its June 16, 2020, meeting.

At the time, authority Chairperson Melissa Beegle said McCarthy’s administrative experience helped set him apart from the other candidates.

The White Lake Fire Authority serves three municipalities — the city of Whitehall, Whitehall Township and Fruitland Township — and McCarthy already had experience handling the authority’s administrative budget and employee payroll.

The authority also considered applicants’ community involvement and how well they would work with existing employees, Beegle said at the time.

McCarthy said following his selection that he was excited about the new challenge and wanted to continue providing strong customer service to the community.

The promotion also meant a significant change after years of working 24-hour rotations. As chief, McCarthy moved to a more traditional day-time schedule, which he said at the time would make him more accessible to the public by phone, text and email.

McCarthy officially took over as fire chief July 1, 2020.

Over the years, the responsibilities of the fire service have expanded well beyond fighting fires.

“If it is an emergency, we respond,” McCarthy said.

“Medical, fire, HazMat, rescue, water emergency, technical rescue, missing persons, you name it,” he said.

“If the firefighters can help a situation in any way, we show up.”

McCarthy said the fire authority coordinates its efforts with law enforcement, emergency medical services, dispatch and public works departments.

Firefighters are trained through the county fire academy with state certification and receive additional training and recertification as necessary.



Fire Authority stay prepared

And according to McCarthy, getting to the right location in an emergency with the right equipment takes preparation long before the 911 call comes in.

"We have an apparatus and equipment replacement schedule that helps us stay where we need to be," McCarthy said.

"We have iPads with reporting software that gets us to the right location and gives us any pre-plan information for the building when we arrive," he said.

McCarthy's work also extends beyond emergency calls.

He serves as treasurer of the White Lake Area Chamber & Visitors Bureau board and has continued the public education work that became one of his responsibilities early in his career.

In May, McCarthy led a Chamber workshop for local businesses focused on safety, fire prevention, preparedness and fire inspection readiness.

"I teach numerous CPR/first aid classes for the community every year," McCarthy said.

The fire authority also maintains a visible presence throughout the communities it serves.

"We participate in close to 50 events every year, from fire prevention to parades to community picnics, 5Ks, school events, sporting events, etc.," McCarthy said.

For McCarthy, those appearances are another part of serving the communities where he has spent nearly a quarter-century as a firefighter.

"If we can get face time with our community, we show up."



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Officer Sova completes 30-year career

BY CRISTINA JUSKA
SHORELINE MEDIA STAFF WRITER

Officer Derek Sova served with the Whitehall Police Department for 30 years, starting at age 25 and spending his entire law enforcement career with the department. He retired earlier this year.

"We started on the same day in 1996," Chief Brandon Mahoney said. "We learned a lot over the years together, made some mistakes early on and got in trouble with command."

Mahoney said Sova was a great colleague to begin his career with and has proved to be a dedicated and reliable member of the force.

"He's always been here for us," Mahoney said.

Sova grew up in Norton Shores and lives in Twin Lake. He said his favorite part of the job has been the camarade-

rie with fellow officers. That was clear at the retirement gathering, as police officers and firefighters from Whitehall, Montague and surrounding communities came together to wish him well.

Sova said he is looking forward to "not waking up at 3 a.m." in retirement and enjoying more freedom after three decades of service.

Former Whitehall police chief and current City Council member Roger Squiers attended the celebration. He said he got to know Sova well over the years as they worked the day shift together.

"Derek has been looking forward to this for a long time," Squiers said. "He's a great guy, and I'm very happy for him."

Squiers added, "I'm loving my retirement, so I know he will, too."

Mahoney said that while the department will miss Sova, he is excited for what comes next for him.

"It's been a great run," Mahoney said.



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'Stressful, dynamic ... Physically demanding'

Manistee County sheriff talks about developing, maintaining critical physical and mental strengths

BY DAVID L. BARBER
SHORELINE MEDIA CORRESPONDENT

To help lift the pressures of his job from his shoulders, Manistee County Sheriff Brian Gutowski lifts weights – literally.

Oh, he lifts those heavy weights because he enjoys the intense challenges of the workout, too. And he lifts those weights because it's a family thing – his wife and children all lift weights, as well.

A 2003 graduate of Manistee High School who then attended West Shore Community College where he completed police academy training – he graduated with an Associates Degree in Criminal Justice – Gutowski took part in a Q & A with the Daily News regarding the importance of first responders to develop and maintain their healthy physical and mental strengths.

To say Gutowski knows a little bit about the importance of that is an understatement – he grew up in a first responder's house. His father, Ron Gutowski, served as fire chief for the Filer Township Fire Department from 1991 through 2021.

"I grew up watching my dad drop everything to go and help people in need," said the younger Gutowski. "I truly admired that there were people – and especially my dad – who were willing to give themselves and their time to serve something bigger than just themselves. It was always something I knew I wanted to do with my life.

"I talk about my dad's influence, but I should also mention my mom, Kathy Gutowski, who is one of the hardest working people I know. Both my parents showed my sister and I the value of hard work, loyalty, and dedication



in whatever we do. Without both of them, I wouldn't be where I am today."

LDN – Why is it important for all first responders – police, fire, etc. – to develop and maintain healthy physical and mental strengths?

GUTOWSKI – Physical and mental strength is so important for law

enforcement or any first responder. When people need help, they call us. Those situations are often stressful, dynamic, and can be physically demanding. If you aren't taking care of yourself, it makes it more difficult to take care of others during those situations. When people call for help,

they're counting on us to be able to perform.

Along with performing in the moment, the biggest driver for me is the physical toll this type of work takes on our bodies. Life expectancy of a law enforcement officer is about 57 years which is roughly 22 years less than the general population. Law enforcement officers experience their first cardiac event at an average age of 46-49 compared to 65-67 for the general non-law enforcement population. There are many factors that contribute to this including shift work, chronic adrenaline spikes that strain the heart over time, critical incidents, sudden overexertion during high-intensity calls which can trigger acute events, and poor lifestyle factors including poor sleep patterns, irregular diet, and high rates of hypertension.

On the mental health side, law enforcement officers experience significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and burnout compared to non-law enforcement citizens. The research shows (the numbers) have roughly doubled the prevalence of PTSD and depression (around 20 percent) compared to the general public (seven to nine percent). Some of the contributing factors for this is the chronic exposure to violence, death, and human suffering. A non-law enforcement citizen typically experiences 2-4 traumatic events in their lifetime. A law enforcement officer will experience 178 to over 900 critical or traumatic events during the course of a full career.

When you look at the data, it shows just how important it is for law enforcement officers to take care of

themselves both mentally and physically.

LDN - Speaking of the latter - mental health - as sheriff how do you and your team of administrators promote positive mental health among those who wear a badge?

GUTOWSKI - We have been working on improving the mental health of our staff by offering an employee assistance program. Manistee County currently offers free sessions to staff who need to talk to someone. We are also currently working to increase the number of sessions. Internally, our administrative staff understand how important the mental health of our staff is. I often say, "we employ humans." I think the general public sometimes forgets that behind every badge is a normal human being who experiences the same emotions, personal struggles, and challenges that they do.

LDN - In regards to maintaining a strong physical structure, how do you and your team of administrators promote positive physical workouts?

GUTOWSKI - We are currently in talks to implement a wellness program to encourage our staff to exercise. Discussion of that began with our most recent contract negotiations and I'm looking forward to putting that into place. We hope to offer gym memberships to our staff and potentially incentives that will encourage them to improve their physical and mental health.

LDN - What type of physical exercises do you promote for your team?

GUTOWSKI - When I talk to anyone about starting something physically, I always encourage them to start small. Even small changes like getting seven to eight hours of sleep per night and

walking at least 10,000 steps per day can have a huge impact for people who haven't done much in the past.

LDN - You, yourself, are a weightlifter. How long have you been doing that and how do you see it has benefited you?

GUTOWSKI - I started lifting weights seriously about ten years ago. Aside from feeling better about how I look (because who doesn't want to feel good about how they look?), it really has improved nearly every aspect of my life. Aside from the added benefits for my work, the real improvement I have seen is in my personal life. I have two young boys who are always on the go. Exercising has given me the ability to keep up with them and stay engaged and active as a parent. When I started looking at the physical toll this profession can take, I decided it was important for me to start taking care of myself so that I could have the best opportunity to be around to watch my children grow up.

LDN - Your family? They all lift weights too, don't they?

GUTOWSKI - We have a personal gym we built at our house and our boys spend time in the gym with us. Children soak in what they see their parents doing. I love that our boys see us working out on a regular basis. The boys have their own weights and often will mimic what they see Jackie and I doing in the gym. In a world where tablets and phones seem to dominate many children's time, we make a point to encourage our kids to play outside, hang out with us in the gym, and be physically active daily.

LDN - How would you say that what you do physically - weightlifting -



helps you mentally?

GUTOWSKI - For me personally, this is one of the biggest benefits I have experienced from lifting weights. Lifting is my stress relief and something I've found it to be very effective in relieving the stress of a career in law enforcement. The time I spend in the gym often gives me a chance to focus on myself, rather than the stressors I'm experiencing. When you look at the chemical and hormonal side of things, exercise can lower your baseline stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline along with releasing endorphins and serotonin. Exercise can also mimic mild stress which can help handle real-life stressors better. For me, it also

helps me sleep better. Sleep, especially in the society where people doomscroll on their phones for hours before bed, is the biggest simple improvement most people should focus on to start improving the way they feel.

LDN - Anything you'd like to add?

GUTOWSKI - Along with exercise, the other difficult thing for most people is nutrition. Most people really have no idea what they're putting into their bodies and often that can be the biggest hurdle for people when they're trying to improve their health. I encourage people to take a look at their diet and try to educate themselves on the importance of the nutrition side of things as well.



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Patrolling paradise: Deputy Brendan Nienhuis reports for dune duty

Sheriff's Deputy Brendan Nienhuis was recently chosen to be Golden Township's full-time, contracted deputy, the first position of its kind in Oceana County.

Golden Township is situated on Lake Michigan and home to the Silver Lake Sand Dunes. With miles of sand and sweeping views of Lake Michigan and Silver Lake, the dunes attract more than one million visitors to the area each year. For off-road enthusiasts, they are famously the only place east of the Mississippi River where you can legally drive an ORV on sand dunes.

All of this to say, the area poses unique challenges to law enforcement. But as someone who grew up in Oceana County, Nienhuis has been navigating these lakes and dunes his entire life, making him uniquely suited to this job.

As a student at Hart High School, he participated in criminal justice courses through the West Shore ESD Career and Technical Education (CTE) program.

"That's when I got hooked on law enforcement," Nienhuis said.

After high school, he continued his education at West Shore Community College in Ludington, and graduated from their police academy. During this time, he served as a seasonal marine deputy in Oceana County under Deputy Tim Simon, learning the ins and outs of water rescues.

Following the police academy, Nienhuis joined the Oceana Sheriff's Office patrol division, and also spent time working in court services, where he says he learned a lot about the judicial process. He is a member of the Sheriff's dive and drone teams, as well.

When the year-round Golden Township position came open, Nienhuis jumped at the opportunity, knowing that it was exactly where he wanted to be.

"I'm the only Sheriff's Deputy east of the Mississippi who gets to do THIS," he said, gesturing to the sand dunes stretching out for miles around his Polaris dune

patrol vehicle. "Every day is different."

Seconds later, Nienhuis sees a man driving a Chevy Corvette through the dunes—a definite first in his experience. Most vehicles with four-wheel or all-wheel drive can drive on the dunes with decreased tire pressure, he said, but the Corvette was unexpected.

Nienhuis took Shoreline Media on a tour of the dunes ORV area, pointing out the thrill-seekers' favorite spots like Test Hill, Sunset Hill, the snake pit, the drag strip and the wetlands. Some folks avoid these areas and simply drive through the dunes to access the beach on Lake Michigan.

The snake pit is a bowl-shaped area for doing "donuts" and the drag strip is the only legal place to drag race in Michigan, he said. Some of these areas are directional and others are more of a "free for all," so it is important to obey directional signs and keep your eyes peeled while driving on the dunes.

When on duty, Nienhuis is the first response to any call in Golden Township, so he often finds himself dashing to the dunes for ORV crashes or jumping in a lake to rescue a swimmer in trouble. There are also medical events, domestic issues and traffic infractions that he encounters throughout the township.

He said that Michigan Department of Natural Resources officers are vital to keeping people safe on the dunes, and that he works very closely with his DNR counterparts. They are often already on the scene of a dune accident when he arrives to take the official report.

As for dune safety and accident prevention, Nienhuis said that most accidents occur due to drivers who are "overly confident or driving beyond their ability." Many accidents on the dunes cite "speed too fast" as a factor.

Proper safety equipment like seatbelts and helmets are key to preventing serious injuries. Inexperienced drivers or those

who rent a dune vehicle may need guidance, which may come from law enforcement or from other dune riders. But even those with experience can find the dunes tricky to navigate, Nienhuis said, with their shifting sands and surprisingly steep slopes.

“Education is about 95 percent of the job,” Nienhuis said, adding that the dune community helps his cause by showing newbies the rules of the road—and also helps each other out, without question.

“If you have your hood up, someone will stop and offer to tow you out,” he said.

When the tourist season winds down, Nienhuis will keep patrolling the roads of Golden Township, ensuring a proactive presence throughout the year. He will also check on homes that are vacant during the winter months, by owner request. Seasonal residents can sign up for property checks via the new phone app offered by the Oceana County Sheriff’s Office.



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Remembering Trooper Paul Butterfield: 'We're all one big family'

BY LOIS TOMASZEWSKI
SHORELINE MEDIA EXECUTIVE EDITOR

On the evening of Sept. 9, 2013, Mason County Sheriff Kim Cole had been talking with Michigan State Police Trooper Paul K. Butterfield II.

Hours later, Cole and other first responders were confronting the loss of a friend and fellow officer.

"We were good friends," Cole said that night.

"We're all one big family."

More than a decade later, Butterfield's death remains part of the collective memory of first responders in Mason and Manistee counties.

Each September, current and retired law enforcement officers join Butterfield's family, friends and community residents at a roadside memorial along Custer Road near Townline Road, where the 43-year-old trooper was shot during a traffic stop.

The annual service remembers both Butterfield's sacrifice and the person his friends and colleagues knew.

'Paul was smart'

Butterfield was born Feb. 16, 1970. He joined the Michigan State Police in 1999, graduating as a member of the 118th Trooper Recruit School, and served at the Manistee and Hart posts.

He was also a U.S. Army veteran and an accomplished runner.

Those who knew Butterfield also remember his personality and sense of humor.

At the 10th anniversary memorial in 2023, Michigan State Police Chaplain John Hansen spoke about the man behind the uniform.

"Paul was smart," Hansen said. "He knew there were dangers in the world. He was not only educated, both worldly and through his police training, but he understood people. If he had a fault,

maybe it was that he cared too much."

Cole remembered Butterfield's humor.

"I appreciated Pastor Hansen's kind words about Paul and the sense of humor, because Paul was a really funny guy," Cole said. "And in this line of work, you need to have humor."

That remembrance echoed comments made immediately after Butterfield's death.

"He was a great guy," F/Lt. Kevin Leavitt, then commander of the Hart Post, said in 2013. "He was soft-spoken and a friend to everyone here. He's really going to be missed."

His final call

Butterfield was on patrol on the evening of Sept. 9, 2013, when he stopped a vehicle at about 6:20 p.m. on Custer Road near Townline Road in Mason County.

Three minutes later, a passing motorist called 911 after finding Butterfield on

the ground with a gunshot wound to the head.

The first emergency responders to arrive included Mason County sheriff's deputies and Fountain firefighters.

"They gave him first aid until the ambulance got there," Cole said that night.

Butterfield was airlifted to Munson Medical Center in Traverse City, where he died during emergency surgery.

Even after being critically wounded, Butterfield had been able to relay information about the vehicle and suspects to Mason-Oceana 911.

That information helped launch a search involving law enforcement officers from multiple agencies.

Authorities determined the suspects abandoned the vehicle involved in the traffic stop and stole another vehicle from a residence in northern Mason County.

They were located later that evening at a gas station and convenience store in

More than a decade after his death, annual memorial honors the state trooper, soldier and athlete — and the first responders who answered his final call

Dublin in Manistee County.

Eric Knysz was subsequently convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole. He later died in prison following a suicide attempt. His wife, Sarah Knysz, pleaded guilty to being an accessory after the fact and was sentenced to two to five years in prison.

Butterfield became the 51st Michigan State Police officer to die in the line of duty.

No such thing as a routine stop

For Cole, the shooting underscored the risks officers face during even the most common calls.

“I always tell people there’s no such thing as a routine traffic stop,” Cole said that night.

Butterfield had begun what appeared to be an ordinary traffic stop. Within minutes, deputies, firefighters, emergency medical personnel and police officers from across the region were responding.

Then-Gov. Rick Snyder pointed to that risk in a statement issued after Butterfield’s death, calling the shooting a “grim reminder” that public safety officers put their lives at risk each day protecting Michigan residents.

“Our hearts break when a Michigan State Police trooper, or any of our other police officers or firefighters, is killed in the line of duty,” Snyder said. “Their loss is unquestionably felt by their families as well as the communities they serve and our entire state.”

Fountain firefighters closed Custer Road as the shooting scene was investigated. Mason County sheriff’s deputies, Manistee County sheriff’s deputies, Michigan State Police troopers and Ludington police officers were among those involved in the response and investigation.

Some officers were sent home to be with their families while others took over law enforcement coverage. Cole said the sheriff’s office would hold a debriefing and make sure deputies received what-

ever assistance they needed to cope with the killing.

“We all work so close together up here, it doesn’t matter what color uniform you wear, we’re family,” Cole said. “It’s a tough time for us.”

Athlete, soldier, trooper

Butterfield’s public service began before he became a state trooper.

He served nearly four years in the U.S. Army, with assignments in Hawaii and Michigan, and coached an Army distance running team.

Running had been a lifelong passion.

A graduate of Bridgeport High School, Butterfield won the 1987 Class A state cross country championship and went on to compete for the University of Tennessee in the Southeastern Conference.

His athletic career included appearances at the World Junior Cross Country Championships in Norway and the 1989 Pan-American Track and Field Championships in Argentina.

His Michigan State Police career included work as a Distinguished Expert Marksman, defensive tactics instructor, arson investigator and evidence technician. Butterfield also received an MSP Unit Citation for his role in a 2004 murder investigation.

In 1999, he began his MSP career at the Manistee Post and later served at the Hart Post.

Friends remembered him as fun-loving, devoted to his family and pets and quick with a smile. He was engaged to be married at the time of his death.

‘It feels like it was yesterday’

Ten years after Butterfield’s death, some of the people who knew him long before he wore a state police uniform traveled hundreds of miles to stand beside Custer Road and remember him.

Alexis Hadsall and Stacy Rutherford, who went to high school with Butterfield, traveled from New Mexico for the 2023 service.



“I knew him since he was 5,” Hadsall said. “I’ve been waiting to come out for this every year. This year, I was able to financially pull it off and come out.”

“Not at all,” Rutherford said when asked if it felt like 10 years had passed. “It feels like it was yesterday.”

Cole expressed much the same feeling. “Seems like it was just recently we were sitting out on this road trying to put together what happened that night,” he said.

Why they continue to remember

The remembrance did not end with the 10th anniversary.

At the 2024 memorial, Michigan State Police Sixth District Commander Jason Nemecek, a friend and former co-worker of Butterfield, spoke about why continuing the tradition matters.

“I think it is extremely important to memorialize Paul’s life,” Nemecek said. He also spoke about remembering Butterfield’s sacrifice and the sacrifices law enforcement officers continue to make.

Hansen, who also worked with Butterfield, remembered him in 2024 as “loyal and devoted to his career” and someone who was always willing to help others.

Hansen also recognized the law enforcement officers, firefighters, EMS personnel and others who continue to serve their communities.

A name that remains

Butterfield’s service has been memorialized beyond the roadside where people gather each September.

Public Act 441 of 2014 formally designated a portion of M-116 in Mason County as the “Trooper Paul K. Butterfield,

II Memorial Highway.” The designated stretch extends from the Lincoln River north to the Big Sable River.

Signs marking the memorial highway were erected in 2015 near Ludington State Park.

Butterfield’s family also established the Trooper Paul K. Butterfield II Memorial Scholarship through the Frankenth Community Foundation.

The scholarship grew out of memorial contributions received following Butterfield’s death. His parents, Paul and Patricia Butterfield, wanted to create a permanent tribute to their son after also making contributions to the Humane Society and Michigan State Police Troopers Association.

The Michigan State Police continues to recognize Butterfield among its fallen troopers.

At the 10th anniversary service, the national anthem was sung, Hansen offered the invocation and those gathered joined in “Amazing Grace.” An honor guard from Ludington American Legion Post No. 76 delivered a rifle salute before taps sounded.

Karla McLouth, who attended the service, said the years did not diminish what Butterfield’s death represented.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s been one year, two years, or 10 years,” McLouth said. “You certainly appreciate what our law enforcement and first responders are going through on a daily basis.”

Cole expressed much the same sentiment at the 10th anniversary observance.

“He’ll be missed today, he’ll be missed tomorrow, he’ll be missed for years to come,” Cole said.



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