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An exclusive magazine for Northern Columbia County

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*Hearts on Fire:*  
 Sanford W. Smith Hook  
 & Ladder + Ocean Fire Co. #1

Photo by Ken Bovat

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*Hearts on Fire:*  
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By Sierra M. Shepard • Photos by Ken Bovat





**P**ointed helmets, dalmatians, big red trucks: we're all familiar with their symbols of service; from Richard Scarry's *Busy Town* & decked-out parade floats, all the way up through Junior Firefighter designation

**in grade school. But what happens then? As the lights and sirens fade, they drift into the background – only to be used In Case of Emergency.**

As Mayor and Past Fire Chief John Howe refers to them, the “unpaid professionals” of the 40-member, all-volunteer Chatham Fire Department respond to more than 100 calls each year, and arrive on the scene in the Village within 5 minutes of dispatch. While a call to 911 might seem like a given, it should not be taken for granted – not when the next home they save could be yours. Established in 1858, the Chatham Fire Department boasts volunteers with a track record of decades of service. While no founding members remain (at least, none who'd admit to being 165 years old), some, like David “Chappy” Chapman, have been protecting the community for more than half a century: 60 years, to be precise. But the Department's not what it was then: for better and for worse.

“50 years ago in rural New York, joining

the fire department was the thing to do,” firefighters Phil Genovese & Andy Silver told us. Service also tends to run in the family: some have a legacy of two or three generations under their belts. As the world's gotten wider, more students go off to college or to find their futures somewhere else. University of Minnesota researcher Mark Snyder says that the decline in volunteerism in the US is tied to the recent mass relocation of many Americans: “If people don't live in one place for very long, they tend not to volunteer as much – especially if they are surrounded by other newcomers. The residential stability of your ZIP Code is a really good predictor of how much volunteering goes on in your neighborhood.” Fortunately, our expanding social scene has also gotten more inclusive. A firefighting pedigree isn't required: nor is a certain gender or career path. The firefighters of today are united by one common trait: their desire to help keep their neighbors safe is stronger than the impulse to spend four extra hours a month scrolling on their phones.

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Four hours? *Four hours?* That's all it takes. Imagine undergoing a semester-long course at your average community college, and then being exponentially better able to protect your own home, yourself, and your family for life. You just became a volunteer firefighter! To ensure that every member responding to a call is up-to-date on protocols & technology, joining the department requires a basic medical exam and an initial taxpayer-funded training period of eighty hours at the state-of-the-art training facility in West Ghent. After receiving all their equipment at no cost, the companies drill together for 3-4 hours one or two Wednesday evenings per month; on a curriculum that includes firefighting, rescue operations and hazardous materials responses.

There are, of course, those pesky fires to put out – but to hear volunteer Jeff Damia tell it, that's the best part. "The adrenaline rush of responding to a call, and the gratitude... it's its own reward." While all firefighters are issued pagers, they also come pre-loaded with lives, families, and careers of their own – meaning that of course, not everyone

responds to every call. At present, approximately 10-12 firefighters are available at any given time. Cooperation between county fire companies is vital; and too often, necessary. David Levow (volunteer & Director of Recruitment) who came from a former life in finance at Chase Bank, says it's easy math: "The more members we have, the better we're able to respond with a full crew."

The origin stories of the members of the CFD are as diverse as the town itself. "In any all-volunteer organization, you bring what you have to the table." Andy Silver, the owner of this quote, is also the owner of Chatham Hardware; and oft-called upon for his superior mechanical knowledge. As a town employee overseeing the streets of Chatham, Phil Geneovese is known for beating the GPS to the scene. Mr. Levow's financial background made quick work of replacing the CFD's air compressor – a \$50K piece of equipment, financing for which was daunting, but necessary to supply air to firefighters mired in smoke and soot.

Volunteers are not required to be single, ripped and in their 20s (although members in such category are still encouraged to apply). Nor are they actually required to run into burning buildings. Firefighters can be interior or exterior, dealing with hoses, hydrants, ladders, & traffic control. Got experience with maneuvering a large vehicle? There can be no higher aspiration than to drive the big red truck. As Chatham's award-winning recruitment campaign states: the help they need most is YOU. The same rings true for East Chatham, Austerlitz, Spencertown, Ghent, Kinderhook, Valatie, Hudson, Greenport, Ancram, Taghkanic, and Claverack – just a few of the 30-some fire companies in Columbia County with mutual aid agreements. Approximately 75% of all firefighters in the United States are volunteers, assisting with fundraising, equipment maintenance, or even in the kitchen at pancake breakfasts & fish fries (or in the kitchen at CFD member Christopher Knable's Oprah-recommended bakery, Pieconic!).

One thing's for sure: there's no going back. "One of the things that surprised

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me (although maybe it shouldn't have)," says David Levow, "was the acceptance by the members. I have never seen or felt the slightest hint of resentment or being treated as an outsider coming up from the city to change how things are done. They have been totally accepting, they all know my name (took me a while before I could say the same) and treat me the same way they treat the 40+ year members." "At this point, it's family," adds Mr. Genovese. "When you're old and looking back, you're going to be glad you made this choice."

An April article by the Associated Press states that "American volunteerism has generally declined since the 1950s,"

dropping another 7 percentage points from 2019 to 2021. A recent survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau & Americorps found that only 23% of Americans volunteered at least once in 2021, and the age group philanthropists are most worried about: 18-35. But it's as American as Ben Franklin, who himself organized the nation's first unpaid fire company in 1736. As the French aristocrat and political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "Americans make great and real sacrifices to the public welfare. They hardly ever failed to lend faithful support to each other."

An argument can be made against the

decline resulting from a lack of civil concern; it may stem rather from a perceived lack of time. In this era of overstimulation, both kids and parents are more likely to report feeling 'busy' than feeling fulfilled. But quite aside from the camaraderie cited by many as their major motivation (including Mr. Damia – and as a full-time financial advisor and part-owner in Chatham Brewing Co, the man is nothing if not busy); nothing spells fulfillment like seeing the sustained impact of how your time, energy and passion can actually make a difference. As David Levow points out: "It is a rare occasion that we don't know those we are helping, nor they us."

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But let's talk tangible benefits: with college prerequisites & rents rising, the demographic in question most at-risk for volunteer decline often has so many extracurriculars, work hours, or so much burnout on their plates it can be hard to justify doing anything that does not reap financial reward. Fortunately, in the case of the fire department, not only is the time commitment overestimated (and the social benefits underemphasized): this could be the best way to start planning for your future. In addition to lots and lots of commendation ("It is an understatement to say we are

appreciated. We are very well respected and always thanked profusely, whether we're putting out a fire or handing out candy at Halloween," says Mr. Levov), volunteer firefighters can receive a break on their property or income taxes and special rates on services such as insurance and phone lines. More and more local employers are recognizing the advantage of offering corporate incentives for public service: having a well-staffed fire department to respond to a call at your business is an unimpeachable investment.

If you're like me, some things have to be personally experienced to be believed. The Columbia County Fire Advisory Board invites all neighbors 18 & up to test these claims for themselves. Email [Firefighter@ColumbiaCountyNY.com](mailto:Firefighter@ColumbiaCountyNY.com) to begin your own investigation: let us know what you learn about the Department, your community, and most importantly, yourself.

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