



A hero in life and death

Late fireman's impact still felt

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JODY SOMERS/Staff photographer

A polished ax and a photo of Deputy Chief James D'heron are displayed at his remembrance service yesterday.

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NEW BRUNSWICK — Six-year-old Kiera Varga twirled around and scurried halfway up the fire pole yesterday morning in a purple dress with lime stripes. Cheerful soft rock music played over public-address speakers. Her 5-year-old brother, Daniel, giggled as he swiped white dress-gloves from a firefighter's back pocket, only to be tackled in a warm bear hug.

One year ago yesterday, Deputy Chief James D'heron died after rescuing 15 people from a burning building on Lee Avenue. And while life has gone on for his family — like grandchildren Kiera and Daniel — and for the firemen who considered him a brother, yesterday's memorial service at the firehouse on Joyce Kilmer Avenue floated in that peculiar space between smiles, laughter and tears.

"People say it gets easier after one year," said retired Captain Robert Casale, in a speech about the loss of his friend of 30 years. "But being gone forever will never get easier. It will never make sense to me or anyone else."

D'heron, known as Jimmy D. to his friends, was the first responder to a fire at

50 Lee Ave. at 3 a.m. on Sept. 3, 2004. Charging into the house without protective gear, D'heron, who was 51, roused the building's residents before succumbing to a propane tank's fireball on the second floor.

Yesterday, four rows of 12 firemen in dress uniform with black strips of cloth covering their badges stood under a sky with only an occasional cloud. A procession of 12 bagpipers and eight drummers in green plaid kilts played their way through a crowd of about 50 people before drifting down Seamen Street and fading away.

Deputy Chief Robert C. Rawls performed as master of ceremonies and set the tone.

"We didn't come here to be sad," he said. "We came here to reflect — to remember a person who was a hero in life and in death."

The memorial service kicked off a weekend of celebrations, including today's Jimmy D Memorial 5K Run/Walk, which is sponsored by the James D'heron Memorial Foundation established by his family and friends. Four-hundred racers have signed up. Proceeds from the event will benefit The Children's Burn Camp in Union, Conn. The foundation has raised more than \$30,000 already from a golf outing played in July and from a beer that bears his name at Harvest Moon Brewery/Cafe.

Mayor James Cahill, reminiscing about his life-long friend, said, "There is no one who has had as much of an impact on my life."

The Rev. Szabolcs Nagy of the Presbyterian Church of New Brunswick, the Rev. Vincent Martinez of the Suydam Street Reformed Church and the Rev. Joseph Curry of St. Peter the Apostle Church offered prayers and words of comfort, strength and hope echoed by Casale.

"I know Jimmy is in heaven," Casale said. "If Jimmy ever went to hell, he'd probably put their fire out so fast and save some people on the way out." The crowd chuckled in agreement.

D'heron's wife, Kathleen, sat beside her son-in-law Jon Varga, Kiera, Daniel and her daughter,

Erin Varga, 32, who rose to speak.

She spoke about how her memories of her father have been a comfort to her this past year and how he never regretted anything. She said she only wished he could be here for her children, and she then shared a dream from the night before.

"I was out with my husband," she said of her dream. "I called the babysitter and she said everything's just great. Your father stopped by. He just wanted to see the kids. But he had to leave."

In the crowd, fingers and palms rose to dab wet eyes.

A silver bell rang out. A lone bugler played taps while the firemen stood at attention, a gloved right hand holding a salute. The bagpipers played "Amazing Grace" under a sustained, rising and falling drum roll.

In his benediction, the Rev. Tabiri Chukunta asked for "a Jimmy D. round of applause," which escalated into a standing ovation led by Kathleen, who let out a two-fingered whistle.

After the ceremony, Erin Varga, who plans to run the 5-kilometer race today, reflected on what she called a "strange, strange year."

"I think about him every second of every day," she said of her father. "I think about him coming over my house every night for coffee, his face. It's been a comfort. I can feel his big hand on my shoulder."

Earlier yesterday, 30 friends and fellow firemen gathered at D'heron's graveside at 3 a.m. They came to smoke his beloved cigars, to laugh and cry, and to tell stories about their fallen comrade, marking the anniversary of his last alarm.

"We felt his presence," Casale said of the candlelit gathering. "The only thing that wasn't present was the full moon. He loved to show his money to the moon."

As Casale spoke to a reporter, other firefighters couldn't help but gather around, chiming in with their own memories and stories about Jimmy D.

Firefighter Ed Muller talked about fishing trips and surfing with him at Sandy Hook. Firefighter Vincent Inzano talked about running a basketball league with him at St. Peter's Elementary School.

Muller displayed a crescent moon he wears on a chain in memory of D'heron. "So I can always show my money to the moon," he said.

Muller's necklace, hanging over his heart, reflected something Casale said during the ceremony.

"We need to look for the Jimmy D. in people," he said. "The way they smile, the way they laugh, the way they climb on a fire engine or the way they love to surf. If everyone were half Jimmy D., like a glass being half full, this world would be a hell of a place to live in."

Rick Harrison: