

City mourns fallen firefighter

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Deputy Fire Chief James D'heron died early Friday morning after he rescued 15 people from a burning house at 50 Lee Ave.

D'heron was the first person to arrive at the scene, approximately 90 seconds after a passer-by called 911 from a payphone across the street across at 3:03 a.m. D'heron, who was not wearing a fire coat or helmet, responded first to assess the situation. Shortly after, three fire trucks arrived and got the fire under control.

The announcement came at a press conference Friday afternoon at City Hall. New Brunswick Mayor James Cahill became emotional as he described D'heron.

"James and I have known each other since high school," said Cahill, who was a year ahead of D'heron at St. Peter's High School in New Brunswick during the 1970s. "He was a firefighter's firefighter. He was a skilled professional, fearless and brave - a hero."

A preliminary investigation has led the city to conclude the fire started on the first floor hallway of the house and extended to the second floor. D'heron entered the house, awoke all 15 residents and got them safely out of the building. His body was later found on the second floor.

Cahill said, at the time of the fire, up to 21 residents had been living in the house, which is not an unusual amount for a building that large. Of the 15 D'heron saved, 13 were adults and two were children ages 7 and 12.

Police are still investigating the cause of the fire. The house did contain three propane tanks, which were removed intact, said Police Director Joseph Catanese.



Media Credit: Matt Moss/Staff
Photographer

New Brunswick mayor James Cahill, right, Police Director Joseph Catnese, center, and Fire Director Robert Mclaughlin appear at a press conference last Friday at City Hall to announce the death of firefighter James D'heron.

The city and Red Cross provided the residents with food, clothing shoes and linens, but Cahill said no arrangements for emergency housing were required because they all had friends or relatives to stay with.

D'heron is the fifth firefighter in the city's history to lose his life since the department was first chartered in 1764, Cahill said. The city is currently reviewing its records to determine the last time a firefighter was lost, but Cahill said it was at least 50 years ago.

Viewings for D'heron will be held today at St. Peter The Apostle Roman Catholic Church at 94 Somerset St. from 2 to 4 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m. A funeral Mass will be held tomorrow at 10 a.m. at St. Peter's High School.

D'heron began working at the department in December 1980. He was promoted to captain in July 1994 and named deputy chief in June 2001.

"Jim dedicated his life to the most important service. He made the greatest sacrifice of all: He gave his life so others can be saved," Cahill said. "I want to express my appreciation for city firefighters and firefighters everywhere."

D'heron, 51, is survived by a wife, Kathleen, and three children - Erin, Mickey and Jimmie. He received three commendations for saving people's lives on duty, including one in 1985 when he carried a 5-year-old out of harm's way from a fire on Nichol Avenue.

City Fire Director Robert McLaughlin said D'heron was a dear friend who was a hero while on the job.

"He gave his all to make sure the occupants were saved," McLaughlin said. "He never changed as he moved up the ranks. Words cannot express the emptiness we feel. Chief D'heron was a hero that will be sorely missed."