

Fireside Chat

Oscar Dutch tells NJ FIRE what it takes to 'volunteer'

At 73 years young, Oscar Dutch still drives the tower truck when he goes out on calls with the Absecon Fire Department. He has been a volunteer firefighter for 57 years, and done time as a chief, a Forest Fire Service chief and as an advisory board member for the fire academy. He currently is in his 13th year of volunteering as the chairman of the board of managers for the NJ Fireman's home, and he gives his time to a number of other organizations. It's no wonder that in February, 2013, Mary Pat Christie officially recognized Oscar with a letter naming him one of the state's most dedicated volunteers through the NJ Heroes Program. Check out why Mary Pat Christie made a good call on that one...

Are you still strapping on the SCBA tank and going out on calls?

When we run a fire in the daytime, we have 200 years of experience on the truck. The chief is 53, and we have two other retired guys. But we get the job done. I still drive the tower quite a bit. When I get in, if somebody else is in the driver's seat, the chief will pull him out and put me in there.

How long have you been serving as a volunteer and how did you get started?

I'm in my 47th year in Absecon. Before that, I did 10 years in Galloway with the Bayview Fire Department. My dad was a township fire chief in Galloway and a charter member of Bayview. I joined when I was 16. I drove my first truck to a fire when I was 16. I didn't even have a license. It was an old '38 Chevy open cab truck.

So what have you learned about fighting fires in 57 years of service?

I've worked as a forest fire warden and as a company chief. I took four or five guys from our department to a forest fire, and they said they never worked so hard. With a house fire, you look at it from the outside and know what it's going to do. With a wild lands fire, you have no idea what it's going to do. It has its own mind. It can go around the bend and jump on you.

With all that knowledge and history, why didn't you become a career firefighter?

I had an opportunity to be a paid firefighter in Atlantic City. When my father passed away, a state senator asked me if I wanted the job. He told me I could start tomorrow. I told him what I really wanted was to get into the electrician's union. He said that will take about a week. I had a 33-year career as an electrician. I worked my way up to superintendent.



Have you always gravitated toward leadership positions?

People say no matter where I go I end up at the lead. I just jump in and really get involved. I sit on the board of advisors for the (Atlantic) County Fire Academy, the executive board for county Fireman's Association and I am chairman of the Central Dispatch Committee. I think you get to do a lot of good. You really do.

Did you have time to be chief in Absecon?

I told them I wanted to be chief for six years. I set my goals for what I wanted us to do, and everything got accomplished. The first year I was chief, I saw the city council was republicans. I joined the Republicans' Club. They bought me a pumper my first year. When you become chief, you don't fight fires anymore. You become an administrator.

What has kept you coming back to the firehouse for 57 years...and counting?

You have no idea what you will get thrown into when that whistle goes off. A call came in the other day as, "man on fire." We grabbed all the rescue equipment. Turned out to be fan on fire. But you have no idea what you're up against when you go out on a call. It's competitive, very, very competitive. We've always been that way.

What has kept you volunteering for 57 years...and counting?

When you volunteer, you're on call constantly. When the whistle goes off, you run, you go, and when you're done, you're done. My family has been a big, big help. Being chairman at the Fireman's Home: I couldn't do it without my wife, June.

What has kept you serving the NJ Fireman's home for the past 13 years...and counting?

There are some great people up there, like Hugh Flood, the superintendent. And we've built this place ourselves. That's how we do things. But it's the gratification from the men that grabs you. It takes me a half hour for each one just to sit there and talk to them. One gentleman, we took him off a park bench. We knew he had been a fireman. He told me he never had two nickels to rub against each other. Now, he said he has money in the bank thanks to Mr. Flood. It's just the things like that you can do to help them. Someday, maybe I will be there.

What did getting the NJ Hero award mean to you?

I didn't have a clue that was coming. I had to read it a second time. It made me feel great. I guess they looked at it as putting in so much time and service into it. I couldn't have done that without my family's support. They lived the fire department. 🇺🇸