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Farewell to a firefighter: Brotherhood of firefighters pays tribute to 1 of its own

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ORRTANNA -- Hundreds turned out to mourn a young firefighter laid to rest Tuesday in Orrtanna after Adam E. Cole was killed in the line of duty last week. He died Thursday as a Buchanan Valley volunteer and the same day he learned he was to become a career firefighter in Washington, D.C.

His death was a blow to the brotherhood of firefighters as well as to those who knew him well.

When Rodney Herring learned about the death, he went to the grave of his deceased wife, Eileen, who died on Jan. 27 this year.

"Look out for Adam," he told her. "He's coming up to see you. Don't y'all have too much fun."

Herring, who lives in Littlestown, said the news about Cole made him reflect on his own life.

"Maybe dying isn't a bad thing," he thought. "My wife has died and now my best friend has died."

Herring joined several hundred people Tuesday morning for a funeral at St. Ignatius Loyola Church, Orrtanna, to say farewell to Cole, the firefighter who was killed last week in the line of duty.

Cole, 24, was a member of the Buchanan Valley Volunteer Fire Department. He died in an automobile accident on Thursday while responding to a 7:55 p.m. call.

More than 30 departments from Franklin, Adams and Cumberland counties, plus Washington, D.C., participated in the day's event that ended with the ringing of the bell and a final radio page, where Cole's name was called for the final time over the airwaves, signifying the end of his duty to the department.

The son of Gary and Annette Cole, "Coley" was not like other Buchanan Valley firefighters who come from families with strong traditions in volunteer firefighting, according to Buchanan Valley Deputy Chief John Parr. In fact, Cole was the only person in his family to become a firefighter.

What inspired him is not clear, but those who knew him say he loved it with the very fiber of his being. His parents, who own an area campground, became involved as supporters when he joined the fire company.

'We all hurt'

Family and friends remembered Cole as a fun-loving guy who was always cheerful and helpful to anyone in need.

"You don't really know the support you've got behind you until something like this actually happens," said Eric Christman, a longtime firefighter with Mercersburg Montgomery Peters and Warren Fire Department. "It doesn't matter who it is, or where they're from, it's all brotherhood."

The outpouring of support also came as a surprise to Cole's parents. Buchanan Valley Deputy Chief

The outpouring of support also came as a surprise to Cole's parents, Buchanan Valley Deputy Chief John Parr said. The family has asked for their privacy, but Parr said they were both amazed and appreciative of all the kind words of encouragement.

Parr added, it's "been a long three or four days" for the volunteers at Buchanan Valley, and that the early turnout meant a lot to his crew. He said they've leaned on departments throughout the region since Cole's death, including West End Fire and Rescue of Shippensburg who, in 2003, experienced a line-of-duty death.

"It's departments like (WEFR) that will help get us through this," Parr said.

Cole joined Buchanan Valley three years ago, and recently received his emergency medical technician certification. The morning of his accident he was given a conditional employment offer from Washington, D.C., Fire Department.

"His dad said that's the happiest he had ever seen him," Parr said of Cole's employment.

Parr said Cole was recruited into the department by former chief Larry Dillon, and immediately found his calling. He said Cole was the type of firefighter who would do anything asked of him, and was often found helping with the department's junior firefighters.

He said Cole always had a smile on his face. He was easygoing and laid back. He stayed out of trouble, and never found controversy.

"He's going to be missed, that's for sure," Parr said.

South Mountain Fire Department firefighter Rob Sell said he wasn't fortunate enough to have met Adam before his death, but said he knows many of Buchanan Valley's firefighters. They spoke kindly of Cole, he said.

He said he turned out for the service because "it's a fellow firefighter, it's that simple."

"When one goes down we all hurt," he said.

The funeral

The Rev. Kenneth G. Smith delivered a message of hope and comfort for Cole's family. He described the life of Adam, while noting the importance of the work he loved.

"One thing we will always remember is his young big eyes and life-giving smile," he said.

Smith said he could not think of anything more difficult than for a family to lay a child to rest. That's especially true for parents, he said.

"We've come together, not to ask 'Why?' ... but to reflect on the great mysteries of death that touch us all."

Smith cited a writer who once said, "To those who don't believe, no explanation is possible; to those who do believe, no explanation is necessary."

Noting that Cole was taken "very suddenly and very tragically," he said the young man is now seeing the face of God.

"Jesus is the good shepherd," he said. "He has Adam on his shoulders, in the palm of his hand, as he does all of us."

Firefighters dressed in blue and white stood respectfully in formation during the funeral services, presenting a sea of blue when Cole's casket was hoisted onto a Buchanan Valley engine and carried to his gravesite.

The Washington, D.C., honor guard and bagpipers lead the procession.

Family and friends

At the end of the funeral and burial ceremony, a number of family members and friends spoke of Cole.

Gloria Tomm of Alfred, N.Y., is Cole's cousin. She attended the funeral with both her daughters and her son. All of them recalled the great times they spent with Cole.

"We did a lot family things together," Tomm said. "We went water skiing and boating. He was at both of my daughters' weddings."

"He was very nice and compassionate," added her daughter, Cherie Whitsal.

The family's last visit with Cole was in August during a family reunion.

"He loved playing ping pong," recalled Whitsal's son, Tyler. "I beat him once."

Tomm said they all enjoyed time at the Conewago Campgrounds, which was owned by Cole's family.

In addition to ping pong, Cole also enjoyed NASCAR, according to his friends, Nick Heller and Andy Richwine, who live in the Biglerville area.

"I never saw him upset with anybody," Richwine said. "He was really active in the community."

Heller agreed. He said he remembered Cole as a laid back, easy going type of person. Heller's father, Harold, shared similar thoughts about the young man.

"I've known him since he was a little kid," he said. "He was a young man who loved life and lived it to the fullest."

Nick and Richwine said they were both stunned at the news of Cole's death.

"Everything was coming together for him," Nick said.

Herring said he had known Cole for many years.

"He was a real likable guy and had a big smile," he said. "He would do anything for you."

"He was always telling jokes," added Kim Dillman, Herring's daughter. "We knew him through the campground his family owns."

Amanda Dillman, 21 and her sister, Alicia Dillman, 18, both said Cole used to come over to visit them at their Littlestown home. One year, they all went to Ocean City, Md., to spend time on the beach.

-- Senior writer Jim Hook contributed to this story.

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