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Nelson, Gary

After a quarter century fighting fires fire prevention officer Nelson hangs it up

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After nearly 26 years as a firefighter and fire prevention officer, Gary Nelson has hung up his hat.

Nelson, 54, joined the Belleville Fire Department March 7, 1977 after serving as a volunteer firefighter in Sidney Township.

Since then he has helped save people from fires, extricated people from car crashes, rescued children from the Bay of Quinte and worked to educate the public about the dangerous of fire.

Nelson says it was the excitement of the work that drew him to it.

"It's sort of an adrenaline rush," he admits. Although his greatest sense of satisfaction came from extinguishing a fire before it got out of control or saving somebody's life, the shrill of the siren and rush of fighting a fire are not found in most jobs.

"Everybody's got a little (bit of) kid in them," he says.

Nelson was the first person hired

under former fire Chief Fred Hoskin and was "proud" to have driven the pumper truck that carried Hoskin's casket at his funeral. "We had a lot of respect for each other," he says of his former boss.

Throughout his career Nelson has been active within the firefighting community. He served as president of the Belleville Professional Firefighters' Association in the early 1980s, as district vice-president of the Ontario Professional Firefighters' Association, and more recently, as secretary for the Ontario Municipal Fire Prevention Officers' Association.

He is also the founder of the local Red Knights Motorcycle Club, which raises money for the burn unit at Kingston General Hospital.

"I was the very first Canadian to become international president of the Red Knights, and I had that position for eight years," says Nelson, noting it was unusual because the position is normally held by an American.

After two decades as a firefighter, Nelson made the change to fire prevention officer six years ago.

"I found after 20 years on the suppression group my body wasn't responding the way it's supposed to," he says of one reason for the switch. But there were other factors too. Nelson was in charge of the firefighters during the Belvedere fire in the mid-1990s that took four lives. It had an impact on him and he decided to move to the prevention side of the job. There was also the challenge of trying something different, he says.

Looking back on some of the incidents he's been involved with, a fire at Cherney's furniture store in the late 1980s and another at the Belmont Restaurant in the early 1980s stand out in his mind. Nelson recalls taking his coat off after the winter fire at Cherney's.

"I took the coat off, put it in the laundry drain and it stood there," he says of the amount of ice on it.

During the Belmont fire he had to drive an aerial truck to the scene that had had a brick wall fall on the cab the week before. But the truck was needed, regardless of its condition, so Nelson answered the call.

The down side of the job was seeing a life lost. As a fire prevention officer, he has had to go into buildings to determine the source of the fire sometimes before the victims are removed, he says.

Conversely, when a life is saved, there is a sense of accomplishment.

"It's the kids that get you the most," says Nelson. "And to know you get to them and get them back (to safety)..."

Now that he is officially retired, Nelson plans to work at his newly created business, G.L.N. Fire Code Consulting, and is seriously considering a run for council as a Thurlow Ward representative in the next municipal election.



GARY NELSON