

PEOPLE: Rob McKenzie

Chance meeting changed chief's life

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Ask virtually every little boy what he wants to be when he grows up and you invariably hear policeman or fireman.

Rob McKenzie, on the other hand, wanted to be a pilot.

But a fortuitous meeting in a Richmond Hill swimming pool changed everything and 28 years later on June 1, Mr. McKenzie took over as fire chief of the Whitchurch-Stouffville Fire and Emergency Services Department.

"It became a love and it just became a passion," Mr. McKenzie said. "I found my niche. I never thought of it before. I didn't realize how challenging and exciting it would be."

'I want them to be first rate, as good as any department in the GTA or a bit better.'

At age 19, Mr. McKenzie was saving up for flying lessons by being a lifeguard and swim instructor at Richmond Hill's Centennial Pool.

A student's parent, David Bagley, who was also the Richmond Hill fire department's deputy chief at the time suggested Mr. McKenzie become a volunteer firefighter.

Mr. McKenzie thought: why not. Eventually firefighting became more important than flying.

"I've still got my private pilot's license, but the passion was lost," Mr. McKenzie said.

A year later, in 1983, the Richmond Hill fire department hired five full-time firefighters. Mr. McKenzie was one of them.

Over the next 23 years, Mr. McKenzie worked his way up the ranks to platoon chief.

But Mr. McKenzie wanted

more and in 2006 he joined the Whitchurch-Stouffville fire department as its deputy chief.

"I was at a point in my life (where I wanted) to take a step outside my comfort zone," Mr. McKenzie said. "It's not that I wasn't happy in Richmond Hill, it's just the opportunity I was looking for wasn't there."

"At that time, there was no opportunity for advancement within Richmond Hill."

Over the past four years, the Newmarket resident, along with former chief Chris Power, became involved in replacing several of the department's fleet, hiring nine full-time firefighters and more than 25 volunteers in the last couple of years as well as rolling out the new fire hall. He has also helped the department transition to 24-hour coverage.

"I wouldn't be as confident to do the job if Chief Powers didn't help me the last couple of years," Mr. McKenzie said. "For me, he's a great teacher, leader (and) huge mentor."

Don't expect any widespread changes under Mr. McKenzie.

"As far as the message, the goals, the objectives will likely be the same," he said.

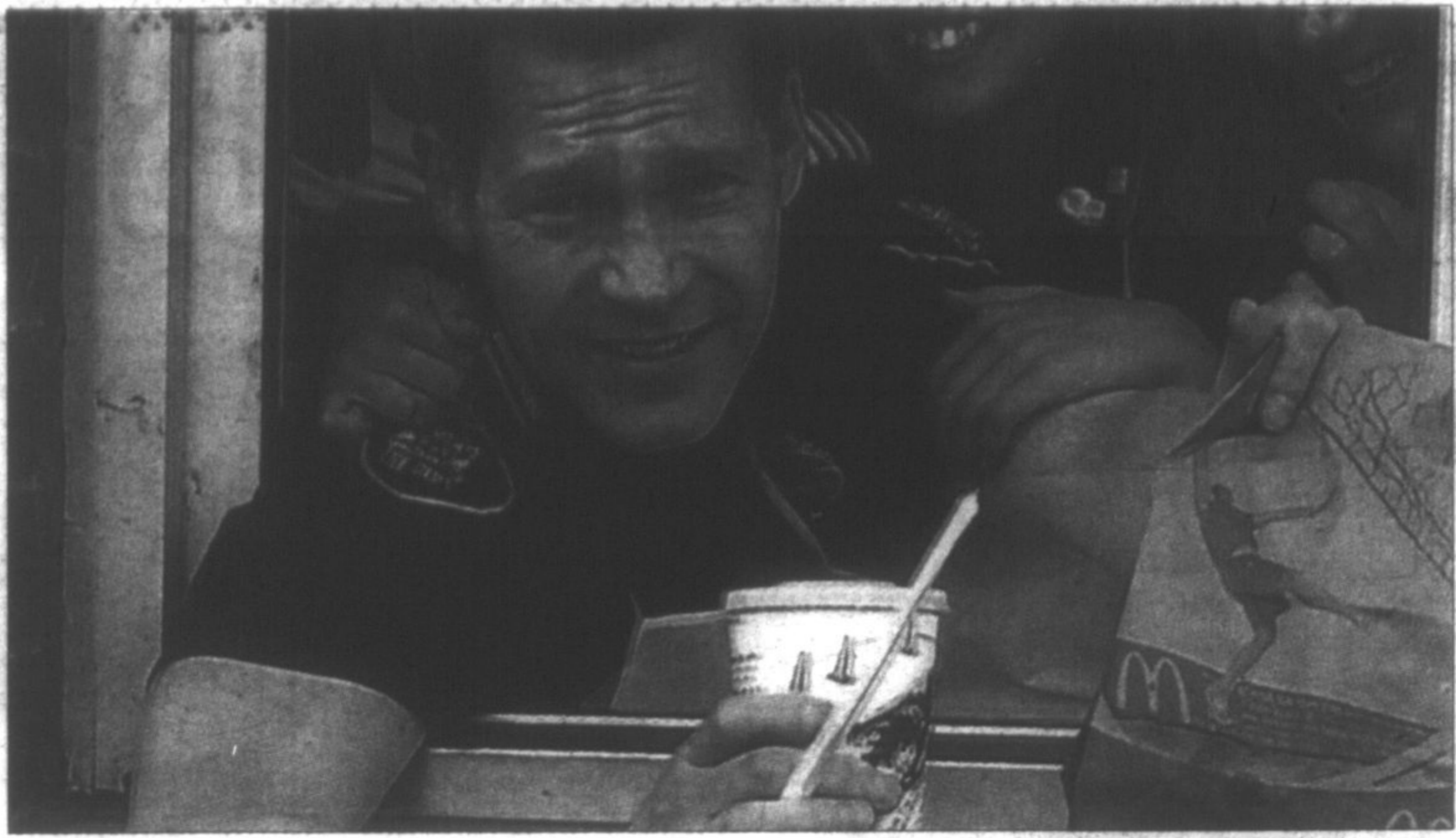
"How we get there might be a little bit different. I don't think you'll notice any big radical changes," Mr. McKenzie added: "I want the department to grow with the town professionally and educationally. I want them to be first rate, as good as any department in the GTA or a bit better."

There have been few surprises during the first few months at the helm.

"It's challenging, definitely, which is thrilling for me," he said. "For fires in this town, it's been unusually quiet the past six or eight months."

Mr. McKenzie has not totally given up on flying.

"When I win the lottery I plan on going back to learn to fly (commercially)," he said.



SUN-TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

New fire chief Rob McKenzie chips in at a McHappy Day in Stouffville.

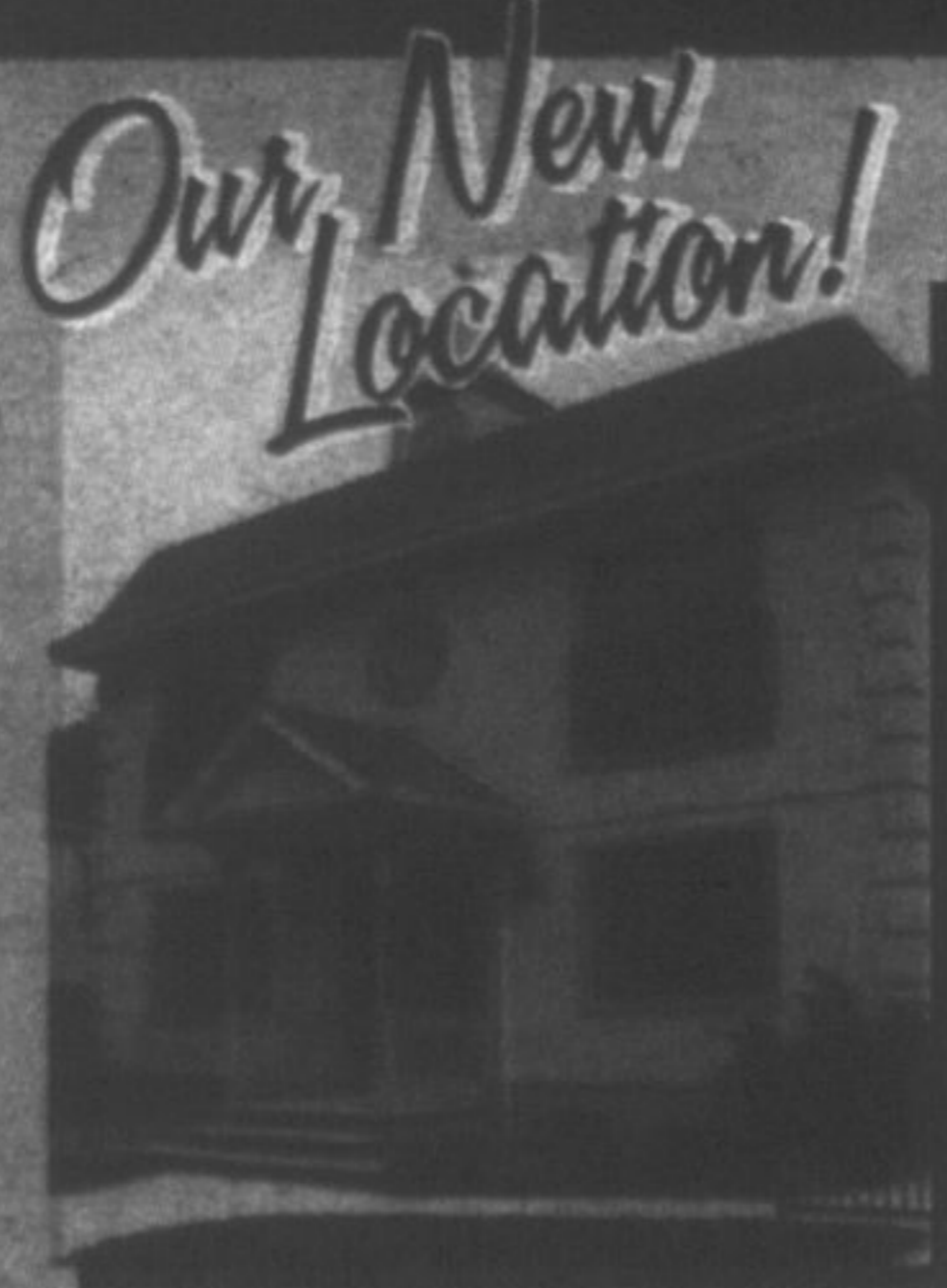
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