

They stay cool under fire

As flames heat up, Racine group helps victims, firefighters

By KRIS KOCHMAN
Special to the Journal Sentinel

Last Updated: Jan. 7, 2006

When a fire bell rings in Racine County, firefighters aren't the only ones who answer the call. For nearly 60 years, a group of volunteers has offered aid to firefighters and victims of fire.

Instead of hook and ladder trucks, the Racine Fire Bells come with coffee, cake and warm socks for the firefighters.

Their trucks offer a place for firefighters to warm up or cool off, and have provided temporary shelter for people displaced by a fire.

Their services were provided at a record level in 2005, and it didn't go unnoticed.

Steve Hansen, deputy chief of the City of Racine Fire Prevention Bureau, called the Fire Bells "a phenomenal group."

Mount Pleasant Fire Chief William Bouma said they are "extremely helpful, a great asset," and Racine Interim Fire Chief Tom Bauer said they are "a very big support group for us."

Glad to help

Fire Bells vice president Barb Davis said the group of 43 volunteers is glad to help.

"We just want to make sure we're there for the firefighters," she said.

The Fire Bells said they responded to 102 incidents involving 25 fire departments in four counties. The previous record was 65 incidents in 2003.

Incidents included 42 house fires, 13 structure fires, 11 grass fires, seven barn fires and six water rescue/recovery efforts. Other fires involved apartments, garages, vehicles and mobile homes.

The Fire Bells responded to 54 incidents in Racine County, including 13 in Racine, eight in Mount Pleasant, five in Raymond and four each in the towns of Burlington, Kansasville and Tichigan.

They had 39 responses in Kenosha County, eight in Walworth County and one in Franklin in Milwaukee County.

Busiest month

December was the group's busiest month, with 19 calls, followed by June with 12 calls.

The Fire Bells served 150 gallons of coffee, 2,214 bottles of Gatorade and 1,900 bottles of water, in addition to other beverages and snacks.

Members volunteered 1,400 hours last year, Davis said.

Bauer, who has served with the Racine Fire Department for 39 years, said firefighters have been grateful for the Bells.

Racine Fire Bells



Photo/Timothy Stein

Dave Wade (right), assistant chief of the Racine Fire Bells, and member Adam Pisula (partially hidden) provide support and warm drinks during a fire last year in the Union Grove-Yorkville area.



Photo/Timothy Stein

Members of the Racine Fire Bells stand by as firefighters take a break following a fire last May in the Village of Sturtevant. The Fire Bells were busier than ever last year, responding to 102 incidents.

Without them, "there would be a lot of thirsty, overheated and freezing firefighters," he said.

"On Thanksgiving night it was a bitter cold and windy night and we had a fully involved house fire," he said. "We were there from about 9 at night until 2 or 3 in the morning. They were there the entire time. They had hot coffee and food, keeping a miserable situation the best they could." The services of the volunteers are likewise appreciated in the hot summer months.

Aid in the heat

Bauer credited the Bells with aiding a Racine firefighter who had become overheated while fighting a fire on a hot, humid day last summer.

"They used a cooling bench and put cold packs on him. They really took care of him," Bauer said. "We are real lucky to have them."

Hansen said, "We appreciate them for everything they've done. They're always quick to lend a hand."

Bouma in Mount Pleasant said the Fire Bells sometimes reach the fire scene ahead of fire departments from outlying areas.

The Racine Fire Bells were formed in 1948 by a small group of area residents who wanted to assist the firefighters.

"They operated out of the trunks of their cars, serving food and coffee to firefighters," Hansen said.

Vehicles are donated

In the 1960s the group got its first vehicle - a four-panel van - and in 1978 acquired a bigger vehicle.

In 1998, the Bells raised \$80,000 to purchase a large truck that was customized to serve as a rehabilitation unit. Individuals, businesses and fire departments have contributed to the Racine Fire Bells organization, Hansen said.

The Bells also sponsor a bingo game twice a month to raise money.

The Mount Pleasant Fire Department donated a former ambulance to the organization in 2001.

Last spring, that unit was relocated to the Lake Geneva Fire Station to more quickly serve communities west of Highway 75 in Racine and Kenosha counties, along with eastern Walworth County. The Racine Fire Bells teamed up with the Ladies Auxiliary of the Lake Geneva Fire Department to serve that area.

Museum preserves history

The Racine Fire Bells also operates Firehouse 3 Museum at 700 6th St., a former Racine fire station built in 1882.

The museum opened in 1973 with a goal of preserving the history of the Fire Department and is used for educating children about fire safety.

Highlights of the museum include a steam fire engine from 1882, a 1930s pumper truck and a hand-drawn hose car built in 1897 from the Horlick Malted Milk Co.

Davis said the Fire Bells welcome new volunteers.

The group meets at 9 a.m. on the second Saturday of each month at the museum.

People may attend the meetings to find out more about volunteering.

Appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Jan. 8, 2006.