

Veteran fireman leads conference in Somerset

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TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT SOMERSET BUREAU

JEROME - Leonard "Bucky" Brown has seen his share of house fires and car wrecks.

A firefighter since 1961, Brown is the oldest member of Jerome Volunteer Fire Company.

Recovering from a recent stroke and wearing a hearing aid, Brown no longer storms burning buildings. He shares in the workload by directing traffic at fires and car wrecks as a member of the fire police.

"I had a stroke and only missed a couple of runs," Brown, 60, said in an interview at the fire company.

"I'll keep doing this until they bury me."

Brown and Jerome's 24 members are celebrating the department's 100th anniversary by hosting the 2004 Somerset County Firemen's Convention.

The convention started Wednesday and runs through tomorrow, when Brown will be the grand marshal in a parade of fire companies.

Men like Brown are keeping active at a time when small fire companies struggle to raise money and attract new members.

"Volunteerism is down," Jerome Chief Nick Panasci said. "Some people don't care."

The steady decline of firefighters on the active roll makes Brown's contribution equally astonishing.

"He's a fixture here," Panasci said. "This place is his life."

The 80th annual county firemen's convention continues 6 to 10 p.m. today and tomorrow afternoon.

A carnival staged by Swank's Steel City Amusements will be in full swing until tomorrow night.

With food and rides, the carnival will keep crowds entertained on grounds next to the fire company on Route 601 in Jerome.

A memorial service was held yesterday at Living Way Mennonite Church, 1st Street, Jerome, followed by local country and western performer George Lucas on the fire company grounds.

The Characters will perform at 7 p.m. today. Hundreds are expected to line the street at 2 p.m. tomorrow for the parade, featuring Brown as grand marshal.

The Fabulous Flashbacks perform at 7 p.m. tomorrow followed by a 10:05 fireworks show.

For Brown it's a time to reflect on his many years as a volunteer.

A tireless worker with an endearing personality, Brown won over many residents in this leafy village in Conemaugh Township, firefighters said.

Brown said he also has worked with Krings and Ideal fire departments in the past. He shares a home with one of two sisters.

"He's one of those guys, rain or shine, he's here," said Patty Coleman, a firefighter and Conemaugh Township emergency medical technician.

Brown is an important part of the fire company's centennial celebration and is often at the fire hall even when he is not on duty. He said he has no plans to retire as a firefighter anytime soon.

"I'm getting older and the reflexes are slower," he said. "I'll keep doing this as long as I can."