

CITY OF MUSCATINE



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REMEMBERING FALLEN FIREFIGHTER MIKE KRUSE

Only line of duty death of Muscatine firefighter occurred on September 14, 2002

MUSCATINE, Iowa – The only Muscatine firefighter to fall in the line of duty will be remembered Saturday (Sept. 14) with a special service at the Firefighters Memorial on the corner of Cedar and East 5th streets. The ceremony commemorates the 22nd anniversary of his death with the laying of a wreath, placing of structural firefighting gear, and a moment of silence.

The ceremony will take place at 7 a.m., rain or shine. The community is invited to join the Muscatine Fire Department (MFD), family, and friends in honoring the memory and dedication of Kruse.



Kruse was dedicated to job safety and protecting Muscatine residents, which is a lesson that is taught to the firefighters of today and will be taught to those of the future. His death in 2002 while battling a structure fire continues to inspire the rank and file of the MFD to dedicate themselves to daily training on firefighting skills and on safety.

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A year and three days after 343 firefighters perished in a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, Muscatine lost one of its own while battling a house fire. Firefighter Michael Kruse was 53-years-old and a 27-year veteran of the MFD when he lost his life on the night of September 14, 2002.

Jerry Ewers, now the Muscatine Fire Chief, remembers the first time working with Kruse as part of his team at Station 2, and sadly remembers the night Kruse lost his life.

"That night is etched in my memory for life," Ewers said.

Muscatine Fire Department's Green Shift responded at 10:30 p.m. to a structure fire on Saturday, Sept. 14, 2002, finding a wooden three-story multi-family home at the intersection of Orange and East 6th streets engulfed in flames. Kruse was one of two firefighters who were working on the structure's roof when Kruse fell through and into the structure below.

When Ewers arrived at the scene, he issued an all-call to bring in other shifts and relieve Green Shift in containing the fire.

"The tragedy suffered by Green Shift was felt by all those who came to the scene," Ewers said. "But it was best to relieve that shift and allow them to grieve. We still had a job to do but it was a very emotional night."

His sacrifice and loss of life while on active duty, the emotional toll it took on his family, co-workers, and Muscatine residents, and the hope that Muscatine will never again experience such a tragedy are all part of the message presented verbally or in the silent thoughts of those attending each memorial service.

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Assistant Fire Chief Mike Hartman also knew Kruse and carried his picture with him when he completed the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation Memorial Stair Climb several years ago in Green Bay, Wis. The significance of the two tragedies coming so close together for Muscatine Firefighters is not lost on Hartman.

"It is sad but also offers you an opportunity to reflect on the job, and the sacrifices they made," Hartman said. "I look at it as a chance to rededicate yourself. Mike passed in 2002 and we don't have a lot of people on staff who remember him."

Ewers first met Kruse in the 1990's as a newly appointed Fire Lieutenant assigned to Station 2. Kruse was a member of Ewers' crew along with then firefighter June Anne Gaeta.

Ewers admits that as a very young, very green fire lieutenant he was book smart but lacked the fire ground command and exposure to structure fires.

"Mike was a true teacher and mentor to me," Ewers said. "His experience in fighting real fires, his expertise with the equipment, and his knowledge of the city helped this young lieutenant grow."

Kruse joined the department in 1975 and was one of the first members to obtain his fire science degree at MCC.

"He was a true firefighter dedicated to protecting property and saving lives," Ewers said. "He was very detail oriented, liked everything clean and in its place, and took his job very seriously."

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One thing about Hartman's relationship with Kruse is that Hartman knows that Kruse would expect him to maintain his training and safety, two things that were very important to Kruse.

"That's one of things I reflect on at this time of year," Hartman said. "What can I do to train a little bit more, to be a little bit safer, or to help our staff train harder and be safer."



Hartman said you can either focus on the negatives of the tragedy or you can look for ways to become better.

"Everybody is sad at the loss of life," Hartman said. "You can be sad and focus on the negative part, or you can be sad and ask what Mike would want you to do. Those of us, especially those who worked with Mike, would ask that question."

Everybody dealt with Kruse's death in a different way. Many on the staff just did not talk about the event or what Kruse meant to the department. A gap started to develop as staff left or retired and were replaced by young new hires. Hartman noted that after a while, one of the newer firefighters asked what he could tell him about the event and about Mike.

Hartman and other staff members realized that they had not done a good job of talking about the fire and the loss of Kruse. So they sat down to put together a presentation they could give to each shift. The two-hour presentation on the event, what went wrong, what could be done better, and what Mike was all about is now presented during each new hire Fire Academy.

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"You cannot undo what happened but you can use what happened and get as much positive out of it as you can," Hartman said. "I think sharing this information with the department and the new hires helps to not only keep Mike's memory alive but it is the right thing to do and brings them into the culture."

Ewers spoke of the difference between commemoration and celebration during his 2012 speech. Commemorating an event, he said, is done to honor the memory of that event. Celebration is a time of rejoicing, a time to feel good about something that has happened.

"Commemorations often remind us of what we have lost," Ewers said. "Commemorations are important, not because of the words spoken, but because of honor, courage, and sacrifice that were displayed during the time of the event itself.

"We all know in our hearts that firefighting is a dangerous profession," Ewers said. "Mike knew this when he was hired in 1975. Not every firefighter who responds to the sound of an alarm is guaranteed a safe return to quarters. Some will be mentally scarred for life with what we see and encounter at emergency scenes, some will be seriously injured, and some will pay the ultimate price.

"So it was with Mike Kruse on September 14, 2002 while battling a house fire at 6th and Orange just a few blocks from here," Ewers said. "We have gathered here to commemorate that tragic event that took one of our own and left behind a painful gap in our ranks. We will continue to do this as long as the Muscatine Fire Department is in existence."