



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FAYETTE FIREFIGHTERS HONOR STUDENT 'HEROES'

Uniontown, PA – For more than 50 years, the Fayette County Firefighters' Association has bridged the gap between first responders and area children through its annual essay contest.

Founded in 1939, the association aims to unify Fayette County's fire departments and promote the betterment of active firefighting, advancement of safety-first endeavors, assistance of conducting instruction, and exhibiting a united front for beneficial legislation.

Association President Ed Zadylak, a life member of Connellsville's New Haven Hose Company, said his organization bases its essay contest on the National Fire Prevention Association's annual theme. Announced in May, this year's theme is "Not Every Hero Wears a Cape; Plan and Practice Your Escape."

"This year, they were looking for essays that showed the children were able to sit down with their families and create an escape plan in case of emergencies," Zadylak said. "The most important thing some of the students wrote about was having smoke alarms on every floor of their homes and by their bedroom doors."

The contest, which is open to students in grades five through eight in all Fayette County schools, begins during Fire Prevention Week in October. This year, the FCFA's Fire Prevention Committee received 737 essays from 12 different schools.

In keeping with tradition, the committee requires all students write their essays by hand, Zadylak added.

"Our committee reads the essays twice before passing them onto the judges," Zadylak said. "The program has expanded over the years to the point where we were able to select 41 winners for 2019."

Each grade boasts a first, second, and third place award, along with a select number of honorable mentions. Each winner receives \$100, a certificate of recognition, special gifts from their hometown fire departments, and donated gifts from New Haven Hose Company life member Charlie Matthews and his wife, Patty.

Additionally, the winners, along with their families, teachers and principals, are invited to the FCFA's annual banquet each December, where they receive their awards and enjoy a night of food, fun, and holiday festivities.

Point Marion hosted this year's banquet, which boasted about 250 guests - the largest crowd to date - and featured a delicious meal; a presentation by guest speaker Tom Maher, a 27-year veteran of the South Union Volunteer Fire Department; the Pledge of Allegiance, led by student winner Sarah Nuttall; and even some surprise guests.

“Tom gave a really great talk, and I think everyone really took it to heart. It’s something that will stick to their ribs for a long time,” Zadylak said. “Then, I did ask the jolly old soul if he would take time out of his busy schedule to visit. All of a sudden, Santa arrived to meet our special guests.”

Kelly Parshall of Fayette City Volunteer Fire Department took on the role of Santa Claus for the evening, giving gifts to the students and taking photos. He was joined by New Haven Hose Company’s mascot, Sparky the Dalmatian, played by Michelle Layton; wife of New Haven Chief Jeff Layton.

Brownsville Volunteer Fire Department No. 1 President Jack Lawver presented the students’ certificates, and a professional photographer captured the night’s special moments. The FCFA then provides each student with copies of the photographs as a keepsake.

“When you look at our theme this year, it’s clear that all of our winners are now heroes, because they researched an important subject that every volunteer firefighter in the country wants them to be prepared for,” Zadylak said. “It’s all about the students. They’re the ones that will take this information home to their families, friends and neighbors, spreading awareness each year.”

Of the 41 award winners, three students also took home extra honors from the banquet, receiving plaques for special achievements.

Albert Gallatin South student Elizabeth Dice received the President’s Award for winning twice during her years of eligibility - once in sixth grade and this year in eighth. Sophia Fisher, a seventh-grader at St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic School, received the Chairman’s Award for achieving what Zadylak called the “hat trick” - winning three years in a row.

Lily Benson, an eighth-grader at LaFayette Middle School, received the Fire Chief’s Award for her essay.

“The Fire Chief’s Award is for one of the winners who we felt combined this year’s theme with their creative writing skills,” Zadylak said. “That means their essay included a factual or fictional account of an event that happened where putting this year’s theme into play saved lives.”

Of this year’s 41 winners, all essays from those in fifth through seventh grade will be submitted to the Western Pennsylvania Firefighters’ Association for consideration in its annual essay contest. Winners will be notified in February and invited to an awards banquet in May.

Zadylak said four of last year’s Fayette County winners went on to receive awards at the regional level, and the students “have to be very accomplished” to achieve such a feat.

But students aren’t the only ones who reap the rewards. Everyone - from the school districts, to the generous donors, to the students’ families - can benefit from the essay contest, as it helps strengthen the fire departments’ relationships in their communities.

“Some schools have made it mandatory for their students to participate, and we couldn’t do this without the support of our teachers and principals. This is one instance where the schools have our backs, and we really appreciate it,” Zadylak said. “This is a revenue-neutral activity for the firefighters’ association, with all the money spent on the students and the banquet. We couldn’t keep growing every year if it weren’t for our generous donors, so we’re very grateful for them.”

The 2019 Fayette County Firefighters’ Association Essay Contest Winners are:

Fifth grade

First - Mia Wisilosky, Hatfield Elementary, South Union Volunteer Fire Department.

Second - Cali Lechliter, Connellsville Area Catholic, New Haven Hose Company.

Third - Brant Alekson, Frazier Elementary, Perry Township Volunteer Fire Department.

Honorable Mentions - Kylie Kolek, St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic School, New Salem Volunteer Fire Department; Gwen Workman, Menallen Elementary, New Salem Volunteer Fire Department; Molly Wingrove, Hatfield Elementary, South Union Volunteer Fire Department; Madison Philburn, Frazier Elementary, Dawson Volunteer Fire Department; Lucas Payton, Menallen Elementary, New Salem Volunteer Fire Department; Jack Wilson, Hatfield Elementary, South Union Volunteer Fire Department; Mya Atkinson, Frazier Elementary, Perry Township Volunteer Fire Department.

Sixth grade

First - Paloma Good, Frazier Elementary, Perry Township Volunteer Fire Department.

Second - Abby Oravets, Albert Gallatin South, Smithfield Volunteer Fire Department.

Third - Sophia Bator, St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic School, North Union Volunteer Fire Department.

Honorable Mentions - Elianna Gadd, Connellsville Area Catholic, Republic Volunteer Fire Department; Kaitlyn May, Menallen Elementary, New Salem Volunteer Fire Department; Amber Karas, St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic School, New Salem Volunteer Fire Department; Paisley Murtha, Menallen Elementary, Uniontown Fire Department; Rhilee Metts, Albert Gallatin South, Smithfield Volunteer Fire Department; Elizabeth Katic, Frazier Elementary, Perry Township Volunteer Fire Department; Ava Clark, Brownsville Middle School, Republic Volunteer Fire Department.

Seventh grade

First - Emily Peck, Laurel Highlands Middle School, Hopwood Volunteer Fire Department.

Second - Delaney Ansell, Brownsville Middle School, Republic Volunteer Fire Department.

Third - Tanner Hayes, Frazier Middle School, Dawson Volunteer Fire Department.

Honorable Mentions - Elle Mancini, Laurel Highlands Middle School, Hopwood Volunteer Fire Department; Taryn Bateman, Frazier Middle School, Perry Township Volunteer Fire Department; Julia Clark, LaFayette Middle School, Smock Volunteer Fire Department; Sophia Fisher, St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic School, Uniontown Fire Department; Maci Chester, Laurel Highlands Middle School, North Union Volunteer Fire Department; Sarah Nuttall, Albert Gallatin North, South Brownsville Volunteer Fire Department; Emily Teeter, Brownsville Middle School, Labelle Volunteer Fire Department; Kahlen Darnell, Albert Gallatin North, McClellandtown Volunteer Fire Department.

Eighth grade

First - Lorelei Cramer, LaFayette Middle School, Uniontown Fire Department.

Second - Makaylah Bailey, Frazier Middle School, Perry Township Volunteer Fire Department.

Third - Lily Benson, LaFayette Middle School, Flatwoods Volunteer Fire Department.

Honorable Mentions - Abby Peden, Belle Vernon Middle School, Washington Township Volunteer Fire Department; Hayleigh Workman, Frazier Middle School, Grindstone Volunteer Fire Department; Hannah O'Neil, Albert Gallatin South, Smithfield Volunteer Fire Department; Elizabeth Dice, Albert Gallatin South, Smithfield Volunteer Fire Department; Gracie Ross, St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic School, Grindstone Volunteer Fire Department; Milena McGowan, Belle Vernon Middle School, North Belle Vernon Volunteer Fire Department; Brock Alekson, Frazier Middle School, Perry Township Volunteer Fire Department.

For more information, visit www.nfpa.org.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.FayetteCountyPA.org.

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For more information, contact Kristi Rooker Kassimer, Public Relations Specialist, at 412-691-0262, kkassimer@fayettecountypa.info or Kaylie Moore, Journalist, at 724-317-6924, kmoore@fayettecountypa.info.