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Division chief Henry Hollander retiring after 27 years of service



By Zoe Deal May 23, 2019

North Whatcom Fire and Rescue Service will say farewell to one of its own at the end of this month.

After 27 years of service, division chief Henry Hollander will retire on May 31, and he can't wait to hear the sweet sound of silence.

Sitting at his desk at Station 63 in mid-May, the sharp tune of his pager breaks through conversation.

"That's what wakes you up at night," chief Hollander said, pointing to the pager. "There are weeks when you get woken up every night, often twice a night. My phone goes day and night, seven days a week because of all the different aspects of work that I'm affiliated with in the department."

Chief Hollander's tall frame is bursting with jokes, stories of the many lives he's lived and the winding paths that brought him to firefighting, his second career.

Born in Holland in 1953, Hollander grew up in Lethbridge, Alberta and Santa Barbara, California. He spent his college years at Santa Barbara City College competing in water polo and swimming. After graduating, he got married and moved to Eureka, where he worked, raced sand cars through the dunes and developed his hunting skills.

Eventually, he took over, managed and then sold his father's refrigeration business back home in Santa Barbara and, with his second wife Cathy, moved to Whatcom County to start a new, "less expensive" life.

By that time, it was the mid-1990s and he was in his forties.

After seeing an advertisement in the Blaine Banner newspaper, he began volunteering one day a week at the Blaine fire department.

"When I joined Blaine as a volunteer, they were just open arms. Everybody was excited, everybody was friendly," he said.

Over the years, chief Hollander collected memories and responsibilities. After six years as a volunteer, he was hired on as a career firefighter. In the years following, he has served as assistant chief of operations, division chief and, eventually, fire marshal.

He's seen a lot of deaths over the years, but there have also been many saves, Hollander said. One of the highlights of his career was delivering a baby in Blaine a few years back, he said.

One of the perks of the job is the lifelong friends that are fostered in the station.

“It’s not just like you’re working 9-to-5 with somebody. You have breakfast with them, work out with them, you go on calls,” he said. It’s a tightknit community bound by shared experiences and a lot of time being stuck in the same room.

Captain Mike Schmidt has been working with Hollander since their volunteer days and has fond memories of camping adventures together.

“We were a group of friends who got hired and had to learn how to work together,” Schmidt said. He recalls Hollander being “a zealot about the [dryer] lint trap,” fueling some tense mornings, but said the best way to describe him would be “a good friend.”

“I’m not even sure I’m prepared for him to retire,” Schmidt said.

Firefighter Kaleb Bruch said Hollander is “irreplaceable.” What he’ll miss most is “just sitting around telling stories” with the chief.

With the vast number of activities chief Hollander has been involved in, the number of his stories is unsurprising. While sand car racing is not an option in the Northwest, Hollander has developed other passions which include barbershop singing, raising goats, fishing and constructing houses.

He calls up a barbershop quartet video on YouTube. They’re singing his favorite song, “Lucky Old Sun” by Kenny Chesney:

*Up in the mornin’ out on the job, work like the devil for my pay,
But that lucky old sun has nothin’ to do but roll around heaven all day.*

Chief Hollander won’t roll around heaven all day for a long while, but he’s looking forward to having a well-deserved break, one with morning walks around the lake with his dog and time with his wife, three kids and two grandchildren. He might even join a pickleball league.

“It has been a great career, I’ve enjoyed it,” he said. “It’s been an honor to be able to serve the community for the 27 years I’ve been able to do it.”

Chief Hollander will get an official fire department send-off at a retirement celebration on Thursday, May 30 from 1 to 4 p.m.

The informal event, which is open to the public, will include a barbeque, with presentations and speeches at 2 p.m.

Following fire service tradition, chief Hollander will sign off with a farewell dispatch, with pipes and drums and one last ride home from duty in the fire engine.