

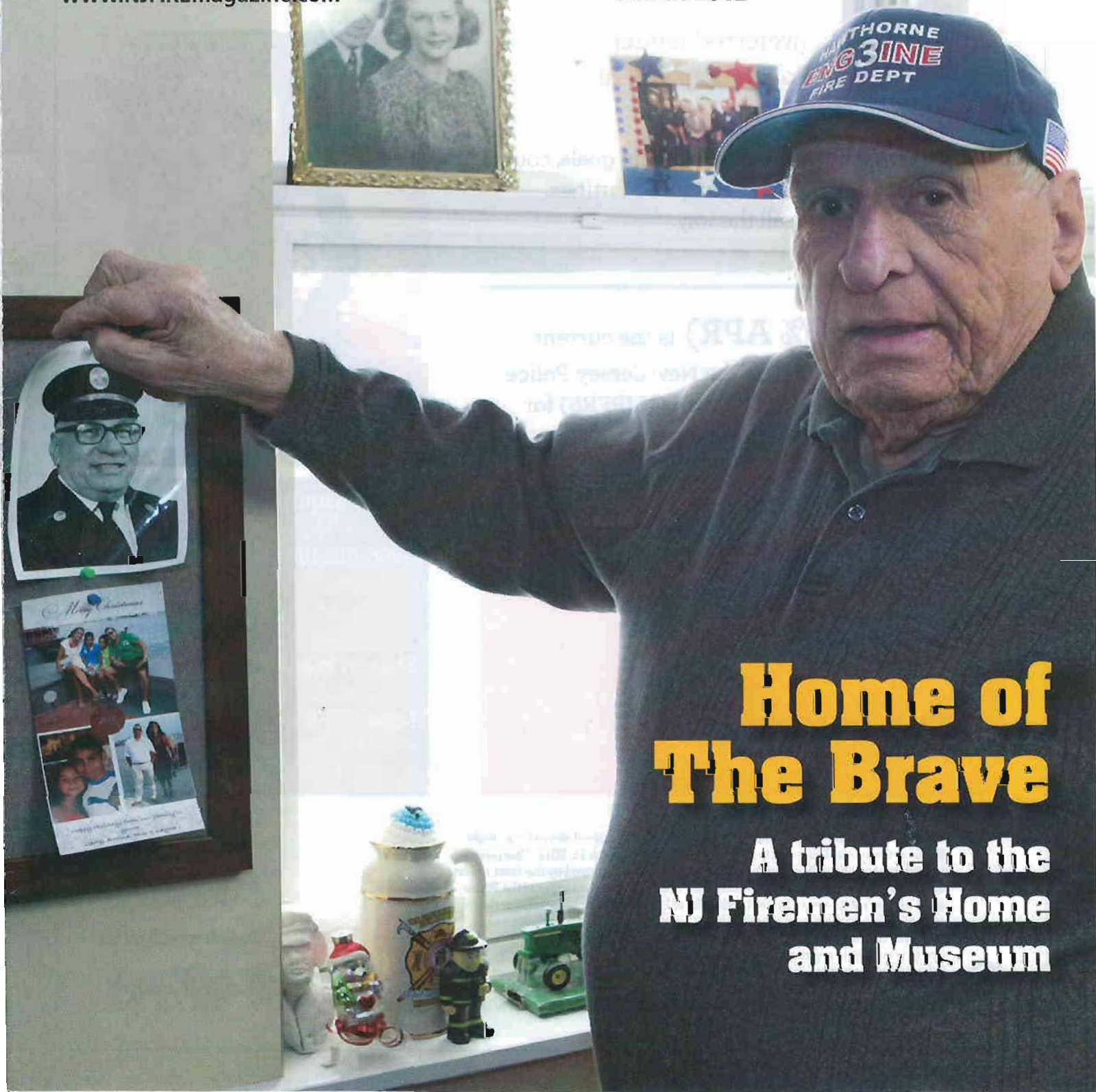
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Home of The Brave

A tribute to the
NJ Firemen's Home
and Museum

Welcome Home



PHOTOS BY DENIS NILAND

The institution known as the New Jersey Firemen's Home pays homage to firefighting and takes care of the heroes who have given so much.

■ BY JOSHUA SIGMUND

One hundred and fourteen years ago, the wealthy Lathrop family generously funded the building that houses the New Jersey Firemen's Home, currently located on the avenue now named after its founding family in Boonton, NJ. In 1897, Colonel Byrd W. Spencer approached the State Association to request a statute to buy 88 scenic acres in Morris County for the Home. He was granted the opportunity to purchase the land for \$25,000, and oversaw the construction of a retirement home for the aged, destitute, injured and disabled firefighters of New Jersey. The first residents were admitted on Sept. 22, 1900.

Driving through the gated metal arch at the property's entrance leads to a long driveway that passes by statues and remnants of historic firefighter hydrants, poles and flags. As the road curves to the left near the front lawn, an impressively maintained building that boasts a century of history contained within its walls sets forth an unmistakable message: There's no place like Home.

Throughout the Home's halls, there is an equal mixture of antiquity and modernity that complement the history of the

building while providing the highest class of amenities and comfort for the 66 residents. The Home boasts 95 beds—20 residential for the residents who are up and about, and 70 for the long-term care residents who require a bit more maintenance. In 1897, one requirement for residence was being able to walk

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A Home of Our Own

The only residency requirement for the NJ Firemen's Home is that applicants had to have been a firefighter for at least one year. Monthly dues are \$850, which includes room and board, laundry, housekeeping and catering—much less than the thousands of dollars charged by other retirement homes.

The Home receives no federal funding. A 2-percent surtax on fire insurance sold in the state goes to the Home. Budgets are prepared two years in advance and must be submitted to the governor for approval.

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in since the dorms were located on the stair-only accessible third floor. Since then, four out of the five dorms have been renovated, and now less-mobile applicants can be accepted.

A staff of nurses greater than the number of residents work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and doctors visit regularly and are on call at any time. For the past three years, the nursing staff has been run by Donna Russo, an R.N. since 1985. "We staff as if we had fully occupied all 95 beds," she says. Russo is responsible for overseeing the nursing care and supervising the personnel.



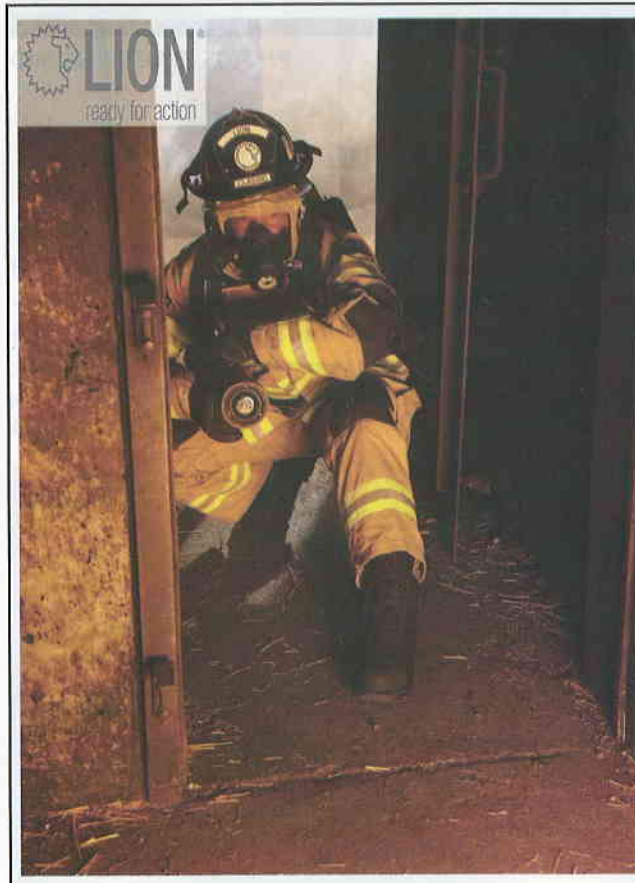
NJ Firemen's Home Superintendent Hugh Flood, seated, and Donna Russo, a registered nurse since 1985, lead a staff that is capable of handling up to 95 patients.

She handles issues with the Department of Health, which has licensed and sanctioned the Home as a long-term care facility and residential healthcare facility, and regularly inspects the premises. Russo maintains a hands-on relationship with the residents. "It is a pleasure to take care of these heroes."

Russo also works hand-in-hand with the Home's Superintendent Hugh Flood. The two oversee an unprecedented level of quality of life for the residents. "We have a higher level of standards than regular nursing homes," states Flood. "Due to the fire service's benchmarks, the residents expect it." Cleanliness is



Residents of the NJ Firemen's home are treated to daily activities ranging from concerts to classes to day trips to dances.



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paramount – there is no trace of the standard ammonia smell that protrudes from other nursing homes and hospitals – and safety is key. “We want guests to receive the best possible service as long as they are here,” says Flood. “We even wash the wheelchairs weekly.”

No slowing down

Residents are treated to daily activities ranging from concerts to classes to day trips to dances. There is never a dull moment. The parade in Boonton is a big draw, and the trip to New York’s Intrepid Museum is annually anticipated. In addition, the Home transports 10-20 residents to Wildwood for the annual New Jersey Firefighters Convention each year. At the convention, each resident is introduced to the New Jersey firefighter community and they each receive standing ovations from their successors.

Throughout the year, fire companies go to great lengths to acknowledge and remember their alumni. There are frequent visits from active members, and different firehouses invite their honored guests to events such as steak and lobster dinners. “It is a compliment to the fire service,” acclaims Flood. “They’re not forgotten.”

The state’s Ladies Auxiliary groups are aware of the Home and take special interests in the residents. Initiated by Marge Caffrey, the wife of a deceased firefighter, an “Adopt-a-Firefighter” program offers events and fundraisers including a cigar rolling contest in Pinebrook and a chili contest with the revenue going to the Home.

Meet Lou

Residents age from 57 to Mr. Brown who is just shy of the centennial achievement at an honorable 99 years old. But at a competitive 93, Hawthorne’s Lou Klein is still sharp and active at the New Jersey Firemen’s Home. Before retiring at age 63, Klein spent 32 years as a volunteer firefighter in Hawthorne, mostly as a First Lieutenant. Klein’s friend, Kenny Silvestri, the Passaic County Board Member of the Home, told Lou about



the facility, and he promptly moved in and never looked back. “Life here is very good,” Lou says. “I wake up at 5:30 a.m. and the bell rings at 8 for breakfast. I enjoy the activities on the weekends and the convention is great when the young guys come up to you.”

Klein is an unofficial resident photographer at the home, and his pictures are featured around the facility. Before protecting his community, Klein served his country, fighting in an Army Field Artillery division in World War II. “I was 20 years old and was married for two weeks before they sent me away,” he

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recalls. Klein fought through North Africa before being deployed to Europe to chase the Germans back to Berlin. His specific duty was as a bulldozer operator, which translated well to his firefighting career where he worked as a mechanic repairing fire trucks.

As a testament to willpower, Klein attributes his liveliness to having never smoked (even during the war he would trade his Lucky Strikes to the local ladies), and to having worked seven days a week for years.

About the other residents, he says, "they don't brag about being firefighters but everyone exaggerates their stories." Klein recalls a call when he had to pull a lady out of her bathtub as her house burned.

Remnants of days gone by

Adjacent to the Home is the New Jersey Firemen's Home Museum. Nobody knows exactly when exactly it began, but shortly after the founding of the Home, guests started donating memorabilia to the facility which was stored and displayed in the basement of the original building. The collection grew as a state-wide call went out to all fire departments in the 1970s asking for any available pieces of fire apparatus to add to the museum. The responses were tremendous, and the items moved into a barn on the premises.

In the early 1980s a building committee was formed, and the museum as it is now was constructed. Over the years, the collection has grown to fill the museum facility. Most recently, the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., contributed memorabilia of New Jersey origin including badges, helmet shields, axes and an Exempt belt. One of the most notable acquisitions was the 1955 Ahrens-Fox pumper originally from River Edge. It was previously housed in the NY Firefighters' Museum in Hudson, NY, but was traded to the NJ museum in the fall of 2009.

Lester "Butch" Denny serves as the Museum Chairman. His goal is to get all the pieces documented as thoroughly as possible, since no records have been kept until he took his post last year. "I want the people who follow me to be able to look up the history of each item," he says. "Who donated it, when it arrived, the estimated value at the time and more." A current project of his was distributing 70 framed pictures around the facility. "The residents really enjoy it," he added. "Some of the pictures are 80 or 90 years old; they can really relate."

As for his favorite items, "It's next to impossible to explain. Anything antique in the fire service I enjoy. I look at the side-hand pumpers and imagine the guys pumping at the early hours of the morning. The condition they must have been in must have been fantastic."

The museum has challenges that it is happy to have. "We don't have enough room," exclaims Denny. "When it was built in 1985, it was wonderful – we had plenty of room. Now people have given us so much that we need space to put it without it looking like a flea market. But I'd rather have it that way than the other."

Most of the museum's patrons come from guests of the Home's residents. The museum relies exclusively on donations and volunteers, and without those contributions it will not be able to expand. In the future, Denny is looking to put some items outside like fire hydrants and fire boxes.

"It's not a station, but it's not a nursing home either," he submits. "It's for the firefighters of the state of New Jersey. Like the guys, the museum should reflect the history of the fire service."