

CYFS Deputy Chief hangs up hat



Deputy Chief Paul Leslie was the point man for the Central York Fire Services during and following the 2014 fire which destroyed Aurora United Church. Auroran photo by Brock Weir

By Brock Weir

After 35 years as a firefighter, Paul Leslie, Deputy Chief of the Central York Fire Services (CYFS), has officially hung up his hat. Leslie's final day on the job was Friday, after nearly nine years with the CYFS.

"Timing and opportunity" have been the hallmarks of his career, he says, and when his 35th anniversary as a firefighter coincided with his 55th birthday, he figured it was the perfect time to pursue other opportunities.

"I have some new efforts I want to undertake with my family and a couple of other things I would like to pursue that I just haven't had the time to get involved in so far," he says. "Education is one. I have a penchant for instruction, so I am looking at teaching opportunities. I would love to get involved in some more civil service areas like human rights issues and prevention efforts for violence against women."

If "timing and opportunity" have been a hallmark of his career, so too have the education and prevention components.

Leslie says he was never one of those guys who wanted to be a firefighter growing up, but when he was a young man, "just at loose ends" and sharing an apartment with his brother, a job posting came up for the Toronto Fire Service. It had the makings of an excellent career, he thought, and ultimately had the good fortune to be hired.

"It was the view this was a very honourable thing to be doing and this was a fulfilling career," he says. "The privilege of being able to work in a profession that benefits your community, where you're not having to worry about profit-driven efforts, you're able to look at what is best for the people in your community. That is a pretty privileged position to be in and I realised pretty early on I was a pretty lucky guy."

Beginning his career in Toronto, many of his duties fell under the umbrella of fire prevention, performing inspections with staff,

keeping an eye on the city's larger construction projects and ensuring they were being built safely, were often the orders of the day. High rise fires, at the time, were quite prevalent in the 1980s which spurred a close examination on just how fires were being fought.

After working with the Toronto Department on how to address that issue, he spent the next 17 years working at the Ontario Fire Marshall's Office, working on a number of investigations, as well as looking at how to encourage some behavioural changes across the province.

‘We did a lot of work with some changes in how to approach both code enforcement and public attitudes towards fires, not accepting poor behaviour of people not having working smoke alarms, endangering their children by not having working smoke alarms,’ reflects Leslie. ‘The fire service, up until the last 10 or 15 years, has been quite tolerant of that and I was involved with a number of people who were pushing to change that and make it so it was not a socially acceptable thing to not have working smoke alarms needlessly cause a fire and endanger or kill your family or children.’

‘Coming to the CYFS, there was a huge opportunity with this department as it has continued to grow to help us focus on our growth and ensure our fire fighters are given the training and the support to do the exemplary job they do.’

Moving from the Fire Marshall's Office to the CYFS was a more hands-on experience, and that was part of the appeal. It was rewarding, he said, to make things happen at a local level and to flex some muscle in a new position.

‘To be a good deputy chief, you need to be able to lead people and that is an individual and personal challenge to ensure that you're bringing the right approach to the job to encourage your staff, to motivate your staff, to support your staff and ensure they are having a rewarding and challenging career,’ he says. ‘It is a very fulfilling challenge but it is a constant challenge.’