

New Fire Chief building team while furthering Laing's legacy

The Central York Fire Services in the midst of change, and newly-minted Chief Rocco Volpe is set to lead the way.

Volpe's appointment to the CYFS' top job was announced last week and the new Chief of the fire service serving Aurora and Newmarket has hit the ground running to build his team while looking for opportunities to further the legacy of the late Chief Ian Laing, who was less of a boss and more of a mentor to his successor.

When Laing died suddenly last November, it was the end of 'nine wonderful years' of learning; but it was also a time of self-discovery as Volpe was tasked with filling the role as Acting Chief for 10 months 'to keep things on track' while the Towns considered the future.

They found the perfect fit with the Acting Chief, who first took a leadership position 15 years ago within Whitchurch-Stouffville's fire department and, through their nine years working side-by-side, Volpe says he felt Laing was 'preparing me for that next step.'

But Volpe didn't always aspire to a career in fire service.

When he was 18, he began getting his feet wet in law enforcement, but soon enough that gave way to a career in forestry 'first with the then-City of Scarborough and this led him to a return to school with the goal of studying urban forestry. Here, he faced a number of challenges, including working to clean up the infamous 1998 Ice Storm that crystallized swaths of Ontario and Quebec.

'I got deployed in the Great Ice Storm to assist with emergency services ' fire and police ' and we were assisting taking trees and frozen lines off people's houses in all that,' he recalls. 'Then when I got to work in those communities, I was surrounded by a lot of firefighters, conversations happened, and [they] said, 'Rocco, you kind of have great skills for the fire services' and I asked questions about it, met a couple of people. After the ice storm, I circled back and asked them about the fire service.'

From there, he dedicated his time to night school to pursue this new career path ' and his instructor found there were transferrable skills from his career in urban forestry.

He started off as a recruit firefighter in Richmond Hill 26 years ago, where he learned this important role from the ground up. His superiors nudged him towards the training side of things and there he found a particular niche.

'I went to school to learn about adult education and enhance those skills, and I taught for a good eight or nine years as a training officer and I taught a variety of training programs, recruits and all that. I think it goes back to the person that I am, being people-oriented, wanting to do good for the people in the community,' says Volpe who, after going back to university to further his career as an instructor, found a permanent role in Stouffville.

'That's where I started making an impact in the community,' says the Newmarket resident. 'Although it wasn't my community, it was the next best thing because I was just next door. Within 10 minutes, I was in Whitchurch-Stouffville and I got to make change there, where I served for five or six years.'

It was also there where he met Laing and, as he tells it, 'I just followed him along.'

'There were a lot of lessons I learned in the nine years I spent with him, but one thing that sticks out to me is he always taught me to be on time,' he says. 'One of the things that Chief Laing was a stickler on was your work started at 8.30 and he expected you to be in your office and ready to go for 8.30. He always had expectations when meetings started at certain times that you were available in the seat, getting that meeting started, as he demonstrated it. Another thing he taught me about was dress attire and holding that professionalism. He was a big advocate for wearing a tie, a dress cap every morning. I would wear my dress cap every morning, my tie, and when I was with other fire departments we just never had that.

“Other things he taught me was to be fair, friendly to staff, but then he told me there was an element of the Fire Chief’s position that you would have to be firm and that’s the piece that Fire Chiefs tend to struggle a little bit with because the buck stops with the fire chief and there are those uncomfortable conversations you have with staff, or those matters that people don’t really like to deal with, like discipline and absenteeism. It taught me to be fair, friendly and firm. When you’ve spent nine years with someone, he taught me other pieces like the political acuity side of things.”

Chief Volpe describes himself as a “person who loves relationships and community.” Friendships, he says, “outlast the work” and that is something he wants to underscore in his new role “both within the CYFS and as a community leader in Aurora and Newmarket.

“I would like to work with the team and generate different community events we can open our doors to and enhance the community involvement with us,” he says, adding these efforts will build on their annual Open House, which was held this past Saturday, and their outreach to potential recruits through their Inspire events. “Those are always the staples, but just looking to those community events, how could we integrate better into the community?”

“CYFS is just in the mix of creating a new leadership team. I am excited because we’re going to be posting for two Deputy Fire Chiefs. I’m excited to bring two people into those roles. We have fabulous people in the fire service and I will just want the ability to be a resource for them, a mentor, someone that they can have a conversation in the hopes that I can influence them, that perhaps they would like to take that next step from Deputy to Fire Chief and remove any barriers, any challenges they have, and do this together.

“I will be seeking for the highest educated, sought-out individuals out there and hopefully between the team we can have a fresh start and I can get their ideas in how we can make ourselves that much better and what kind of stamps we can put onto CYFS in furthering Chief Laing’s legacy.”

By Brock Weir