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# 'A good man' laid to rest

Shavertown volunteer firefighter laid to rest in emotional ceremony

**Erik D. Sowga 1975 - 2019**

By Bill O'Boyle  
boboyle@timesleader.com

*Editor's note: This story originally ran on July 3, 2019. We rerun again here as a tribute to Erik Sowga.*

SHAVERTOWN — On a bright Monday morning the Sowga family endured its darkest hour.

Michelle Sowga, with her three children at her side, eulogized her husband, Erik, 43, who passed away unexpectedly Wednesday at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital.

Erik Sowga, a longtime volunteer firefighter, corrections employee and U.S. Navy veteran, made headlines two years ago for the heroic rescue of a woman from a burning home.

He was remembered at Monday's funeral service, held in the same church where he and Michelle were married the Trucksville United Methodist Church.

Friends and family packed "The Church on the Hill," wiping away tears as Michelle talked about Erik and the life they had together.

"I lost my best friend," she said. "He made me whole. He was my rock."

As the Sowga children — Mikayla, Austin and Joseph — stood behind their mom, Michelle continued her heartfelt eulogy.

"Continue to make him proud," Michelle said to her children.

The service was filled with emotion from start to finish. Two of Erik's best friends — Shavertown Volunteer Fire Department Chief Gary Beisel and Paul Mooney of the State Correctional Institute at Dallas — gave moving eulogies that helped tell the story of who Sowga was and how he valued family, friends and community.

Sowga worked at SCI-Dallas, first as a guard, then moving up the ranks to the Facility Maintenance Manager. He also served the Shavertown Volunteer Fire Department for 29 years and as Assistant Fire Chief for 16 of those years.

But it was Michelle who offered the most



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Members of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections stand at the doors of the Trucksville United Methodist Church on Monday during the funeral service of their co-worker Erik Sowga, who was also the Assistant Fire Chief of the Shavertown Fire Department. Sowga rescued a woman from a burning building 2 years ago on July 4th.

moving comments. She told of how she and Erik met in junior high school and briefly dated. She said they were always close friends and kept in touch when Erik entered the U.S. Navy and Michelle went off to college.

"We always kept in touch," she said. "We wrote letters back and forth."

Michelle told of one day running into Erik. "He came down from a ladder and we hugged," she said. "I still remember the feeling I got from that hug."

Michelle said her family returned from a trip to Paris and Erik was waiting on her front porch.

"So was the guy I was dating at the time," she said, drawing laughter. "I don't know what ever happened to Bob."

Michelle said Erik was fixture at her house and the two began dating and eventually got married.

"I see him in our children," she said fighting back tears. "We always knew we loved each other."

Michelle said she never realized how much Erik impacted so many people.

"He influenced so many people," she said. "We all will keep telling Erik stories. He was my everything."

Another emotional moment came when

Mary Lynch and Paul Reinert sang "You Are My Light," written by Lynch's late husband, Joey. Mary noted that she and Joey sang at the Sowga wedding.

The song's lyrics included:

"You are my light,  
You fill my night,  
You make wrong right,  
You are my light."

Chief Beisel said Sowga was his right arm — he called Sowga "a proud husband and father" who loved the fire department.



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

The casket of Assistant Fire Chief Erik Sowga is placed on a Shavertown firetruck after the funeral service at the Trucksville United Methodist Church on Monday.



Erik Sowga

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# BADGE OF HONOR: AL WALKER

**Al Walker | Position: Hanover Township Police Chief | Hometown: Hanover Township**

By Kevin Carroll  
kcarroll@timesleader.com

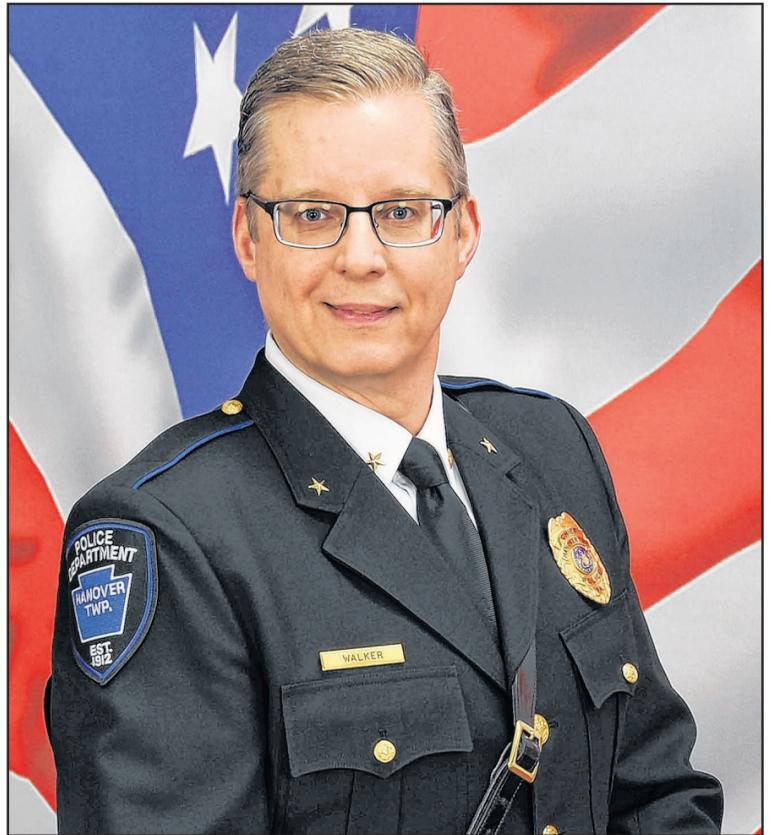
**H**ANOVER TWP. — Police chiefs come and go, but it takes a truly great public figure to lead a police department for more than 10 years, and to be a driving force in that department for over 30.

Hanover Township police Chief Al Walker is one such individual, having served the township for 31 years, and has filled his current role as chief since 2009.

“My function is to make sure that every function in the department is running the way it should,” Walker said in an interview with the Times Leader on Wednesday.

“I may not be in the field providing service anymore, but I provide service in a roundabout way.”

Walker got his start in the world of first responders following his col-



Submitted photo

Al Walker, Hanover Township Police Chief.

lege days, as an emergency dispatcher in Hanover Township. While in this post, he got to see first-hand just how special the police force was through daily interaction.

“I was more impressed with the positive work they were doing, and the positive impact they had,” Walker said.

So, after his stint as a dispatcher came to an end, Walker enrolled in night classes at Luzerne County Community College, eventually earning his associate degree in criminal justice.

In 1988, he joined the Hanover Township police force as a patrolman, a role he occupied for roughly eight years.

“I spent eight or nine years as a patrolman, then spent some time doing detective work, were I was until 2009,” Walker said.

The reason for his departure from the field was a good one: In 2009, Walker’s predecessor retired, and Walker was appointed to the position of police chief, where he’s been ever since.

Walker may not be in the field anymore, but has nothing but the utmost respect for his fellow first responders.

“They should be the ones nominated for this award.”

See ‘WALKER’ | 5



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# BADGE OF HONOR: COLBY BOGNAR

**Colby Bognar | Position: Captain with Sugarloaf Township Fire and Rescue | Hometown: Drums | Age: 27**

By Bill O'Boyle  
boboyle@timesleader.com

**H**AZLETON — Colby Bognar knew at an early age that he wanted to be a firefighter.

After all, his father, Richard, is a former fire chief with Valley Regional Fire and Rescue and his mom, Susan, volunteers as a firefighter/EMT.

So you might say firefighting is in his blood.

But Bognar, a captain with the Sugarloaf Township Fire and Rescue unit, said he started hanging around fire houses when he was a kid and he knew he wanted to one day join the company.

Bognar, who also volunteers with the Hazleton City Fire Department, works a full-time job at Anixter Power Solutions in Mountain Top as a warehouse associate. Bognar, of Drums, is 27 and engaged to be married. All told, he said he's been an active firefighter for 13 years.

But Bognar said he realizes how important it is for people to volunteer with their local fire companies — in fact, it could be a matter of life or death.

"Mainly for me, firefighting is one of my favorite things," Bognar said. "I've always been around fire companies and I always respected what firefighters and rescue personnel do for their communities."

Bognar said being around fire companies his whole life and having parents dedicated to firefighting/rescue services, it made him want to follow in his parents footsteps.

But what sealed the deal for Bognar was the actual volunteer experience of responding to a call.

"Once you help somebody, even if they can't say thank you, the feeling is overwhelming," Bognar said. "The thanks you get as a firefighter is providing that service — it makes you feel good and you want to continue."

As important as it is to have a quality volunteer fire department in every community, Bognar also recognizes the reality that interest has been waning. He said not as many young people aspire to become volunteer firefighters and that could result in problems down the road.

"Fire service now is dwindling down," Bognar said. "Not having the younger generation come around to give us a hand is concerning. Yes



Bill Tarutis | For Times Leader

Colby Bognar, a captain with the Sugarloaf Township Fire and Rescue unit.

it's volunteer time, but we need volunteer firefighters. It's that simple."

Bognar said there are many other interests for young people today and he understands that it takes time to get the required training and certifications to be a volunteer firefighter. However, he said he hopes more young people will recognize how important it is to help out.

"You need the training and the requirements have increased," Bognar said. "That's why coming in, the next generation needs to be dedicated

to the firefighting and rescue service."

Especially at small companies like Sugarloaf Township, a large land mass that needs coverage.

"We're constantly looking for more volunteers, especially younger people," Bognar said. "We want to be able to train them to see what we do and what we need them to do into the future."

The formula is simple — large coverage areas need more volunteers to respond when a fire breaks out or there is the need for rescue personnel.

"Response time is always the key in any call we get," Bognar said. "We need people to respond when something happens."

Bognar said a volunteer must be 18 to respond, but they can come around if younger to observe and learn.

"If a community doesn't have a strong fire company, that community and its people are in jeopardy," Bognar said.



Bill Tarutis | For Times Leader

Colby Bognar, a captain with the Sugarloaf Township Fire and Rescue unit.

## 'WALKER' from 4

When asked about a normal day in the life of a police chief, Walker chuckled.

"My days are anything but normal."

Walker has an extensive list of duties to perform as chief, some that keep him even busier than his days in the field. He has to handle credentials, equipment for the officers, and must deal with the public on an everyday basis. He's also in charge of swearing in new police officers.

"We just had a new officer start on Monday," Walker said.

To Walker, the path to becoming a police officer is a tough one, but one that starts in one place: with education.

"Education is critical," Walker said. "Anyone looking to join the force should get the proper training and education."

In addition to the mental sweat, there are many different traits that go into making an exemplary police officer.

"Integrity, honesty, and empathy are huge," Walker said. "It's easy to become cynical, but you have to have empathy for the people involved, whether they're being arrested or are a loved one involved."

While Walker is a man of business, he does enjoy some free time. He's married with three children, and enjoys that time he gets to spend with his family.

"We like to go on vacations, take in a movie or a ballgame."

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# BADGE OF HONOR: BOB SMITH

**Bob Smith | Position: Retired firefighter, volunteer firefighter**

By Geri Gibbons  
For Times Leader

**K**INGSTON - Bob Smith retired from full time service as a firefighter in 2017, but the Kingston resident still serves as a great asset to the community and fellow fire fighters, a volunteer Fire Marshal.

"I'm now involved in 'pre-planning,'" he said. "That means that we go in and assess commercial buildings, so if they would catch on fire, we would know how best to put them out."

Smith then puts information on those commercial buildings in a format quickly accessible to fire fighters.

Smith's first experience as a fire fighter was when he was in 1966 when a late-night fire broke out during Fourth-of-July weekend.

"During that fire you of the guys I went to school with died," he said. "He was trying to get his dog out of the house and they both died."

During that first fire, Smith said, he has simply been following around a neighbor and ended up helping at the fire.

Because he was only 15 at the time and firefighters were required to be 18, Smith served as an "honorary fire fighter."



Submitted photo

Bob Smith retired as a full-time firefighter in 2017.

At 18, Smith began doing what he continued to do throughout his career – interior fire attack.

"I was scared, of course I was scared," he said. "A fireman wouldn't be telling the truth if he didn't admit he was scared."

But the opportunity to put a fire out, to spot the source inside a home, to make sure everyone was out – that was what Smith said he lived for.

Smith also said putting out fires before they caused significant damage was gratifying.

"You get there to the kitchen fire, you put it out," he said. "There might be some damage, but people can go back and live there."

Smith started working at the Forty-Fort Department in 1974, as a full time fire driver, a department which then merged with Kingston.

Smith remembers that often it was most important to get the apparatus to the fire, with multiple volunteers making their way to the fire.



Submitted photo

Bob Smith's fire helmets.

See 'SMITH' | 10

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# BADGE OF HONOR: RAYMOND HOFFMAN

**Raymond Hoffman | Position: Registered nurse and volunteer firefighter | Age: 29 | Fun Fact: Hoffman has been collecting wristwatches for 15 years**

By Lyndsay Bartos  
lbartos@timesleader.com

**D**ALLAS — What is your motivation for getting out of bed every day? Money, maybe love?

For Raymond Hoffman, 29, his driving force is helping others in the community.

The Dallas native has dedicated his life to protecting and aiding those in need as a registered nurse and a volunteer firefighter. Hoffman has eight years under his belt at Geisinger South Wilkes-Barre and nearly four years as volunteer firefighter with Back Mountain Regional.

The desire to help others is deeply rooted in his family.

“My grandfather was a police captain and growing up he instilled into me the importance on giving back to your community. That’s why he become a police officer, so I wanted to do the same,” Hoffman said.

“That’s why I became a volunteer firefighter as well as a registered nurse, to give back to the community and help people.”

As a man who wears many hats, Hoffman strives to strike a balance between his professional and social life. Back Mountain Regional uses a paging system to dispatch firefighters where they’re needed. So essentially a volunteer firefighter is always on-call, but can opt out because it’s on a volunteer basis.

“I think managing time for everything, between family, work, trying to find time for calls (is the hardest part of the job),” he said.

Hoffman received his formal training at Buck’s County Community College fire academy, and takes his role with fire department very seriously. With the risks surrounding his work, Hoffman offers this advice regarding potentially dangerous situations.

“Just being aware of your surroundings and being mindful of your training,” he said.

In his free time, Hoffman enjoys spending time with his family. He also has an unique pastime.

“One of my hobbies is collecting wristwatches.” Hoffman revealed.

“I’ve been collecting for 15 years; I appreciate the craftsmanship and the time it takes to make the wristwatches.”

Hoffman encourages anyone interested in becoming a volunteer firefighter to pursue that goal. “It’s a great way to give back to your community and it’s very rewarding,” he said.



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## BADGE OF HONOR: SHAUN SKURSKY

**Shaun Skursky | Position: Corrections Officer at SCI - Retreat | Hometown: Plains Township | Favorite Hobby: Skursky maintains a saltwater fish tank that is home to clownfish, tangs, butterflyfish, pufferfish, and coral reefs.**

By Alicia Belch  
abelch@timesleader.com

When it comes to maintaining order within a state correctional facility, communication and consistency are key for corrections officer Shaun Skursky.

Originally from Plains Township, Skursky has been working for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections for three years now. Recently, he transferred back home from State Correctional Institution - Graterford, Montgomery County, to State Correctional Institution - Retreat, Hunlock Creek.

Skursky's commitment to safety and devotion to others in both his personal and professional life account for the reason he was chosen to be one of this year's Times Leader First Responders.

"When the inmates are upset, I try to talk to them and hear their point of view, bring their levels down instead of having to extract them or fight them. The most challenging part of my job is trying to communicate with them through reason before taking more drastic measures," said Skursky.

Skursky's initial inspiration for becoming a corrections officer stems from the experience of another.

"My buddy was at work in the prison and an inmate got nervous and backed out of cell during an extraction, leaving my buddy one guy short. That can't happen, the guards have to have each other's backs. I told him he would never have to be alone again, that I would be there for him. That is when I became a corrections officer. I love it. It is the best job in the world, and I can't imagine doing anything else," Skursky said.

This desire to help others in need has reached individuals outside of Skursky's job and inner circle.

Skursky garnered national attention last March when he helped save a young man from drowning in the lazy river attraction at Avista Resort in South Carolina.

Skursky administered CPR for eight minutes underwater. Since, he has been awarded a life-saving award from the Myrtle Beach Department of Public Safety, a Medal of Valor from Corrections USA and the Law Enforcement Hero Award from the American Red Cross.

"Receiving awards always brings good feelings and knowing that others notice and that someone cared enough to think about me and put me up for these nominations means a lot. But the actual award is knowing I saved this boy. I got a surprise call from his mother recently. He is back in school now, and I was so glad to hear that," said Skursky.



Shaun Skursky and his son Jackson.

Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Skursky's advice to others interested in working within the criminal justice system is to explore available options and keep a strong sense of individualism.

"The Department of Corrections is a great place to start. You could go off in so many different directions with corrections, including parole, state police, vocational instruction — it's unlimited. As far as being a corrections officer, my advice would be you have to be yourself. You can't walk in the gate and act like someone else. Consistency is key, it has to be the same day after day," said Skursky.

Coming home to his family is what Skursky looks forward to the most.

"Being at the jail and seeing the things I see, the most rewarding part of the position is to know I can come home at the end of the day. It's 82 inmates to one corrections officer, so I am surrounded. Any way you look it, my odds aren't good when I walk through the door. Being able to return my family unharmed is the best," Skursky said.

## BADGE OF HONOR: FRANK D. ROMAN III

**Frank D. Roman III | Position: Pittston Deputy Fire Chief**

By Geri Gibbons  
For Times Leader

PITSTON – For more than 40 years, Pittston Deputy Fire Chief Frank D. Roman III has fought fires in Pittston, serving as a role model for younger firefighters and as a great asset to the community.

Roman started with the Pittston Fire Department in 1977 as a volunteer to both the fire department and the ambulance.

When a full-time job became available in 1980, Roman did not hesitate to apply for it, knowing that firefighting would define much of his life.

Fighting fires is never an easy job, with each fire, no matter how small, having the potential of real damage and danger.

Roman looks back on a fire on North Main Street in March of 1993 that took the lives of two young firefighters.

"It was tough," he said. "You found yourself asking, 'Do I want to continue to be a fire fighter.'"

And yet more than 25 years later, Roman has remained a firefighter and is now aware of his responsibility to those who join the department.

"You know how important it is to be careful," he said. "You want to train younger firefighters to keep everyone as safe as possible."

Still, Roman said, the job is a dangerous one.

"You could go out to a fire and all you initially see is smoke, and it turns into a big fire," he said.

Roman has also brought the commitment to firefighting to the next generation, his son, Frank Roman IV, is also a part-time firefighter with the department.

"From when he was little, he would come and sit on the trucks," said Roman.

Roman's grandson, Frank D. Roman, V, at 7 years old also, enjoys visiting the department, also enjoying sitting on a truck and spending time with the firefighters.

Roman said much about the department has stayed the same, and some things have changed.



Submitted photo

For example, the department is now much more likely to go out into the community and teach residents, especially youngsters, about fire safety.

"We use our smoke house to show kids what to do in a fire," he said. "During Fire Safety Week, especially, we go out to schools and help the kids learn what to do in a fire."

The fire department now emphasizes the use of smoke detectors – working smoke detectors.

"The only kind of smoke detector that saves lives is a working smoke detector," he said.

In addition to the opportunity to ensure community safety and assist other emergency personnel in various types of emergencies, Roman enjoys the camaraderie that full-time, part-time and volunteer firefighters enjoy.

It is that camaraderie and the opportunity that keeps Roman, 62, on the job.

"I'll retire someday," he said. "But, I'm not ready yet, not while I'm still able to do the job."

# 'REST'

from 1

Turning to the firefighters in attendance, Beisel said, "Erik understood what you do — the sacrifices you make every day to serve your community. He wanted to assure that you always returned home safely to your families."

Beisel talked about the Medal of Honor that was bestowed on Sowga and four other firefighters from the Shavertown Volunteer Fire Department. For their efforts, they received the presented with the Medal of Valor — the highest decoration awarded for bravery to public safety officers, Beisel said.

On July 4, 2017, Sowga and his fellow firefighters rescued a woman from her burning home in Dallas.

At the time, Sowga said, "Bottom line, I'm glad we were able to save the lady. It's an everyday job for us."

Beisel said Sowga was a friend, a brother — "a good man." And then he said, "All of us at Station 251 say rest in peace. We will take it from here."

Mooney said Sowga loved family above all us. He then said that Sowga had several other families — his church family, baseball, soccer, Boy Scouts, work and Navy families as well.

"He would joke that he served five years in the Navy and never stepped on a ship," Mooney said. "How many sailors can say that?"

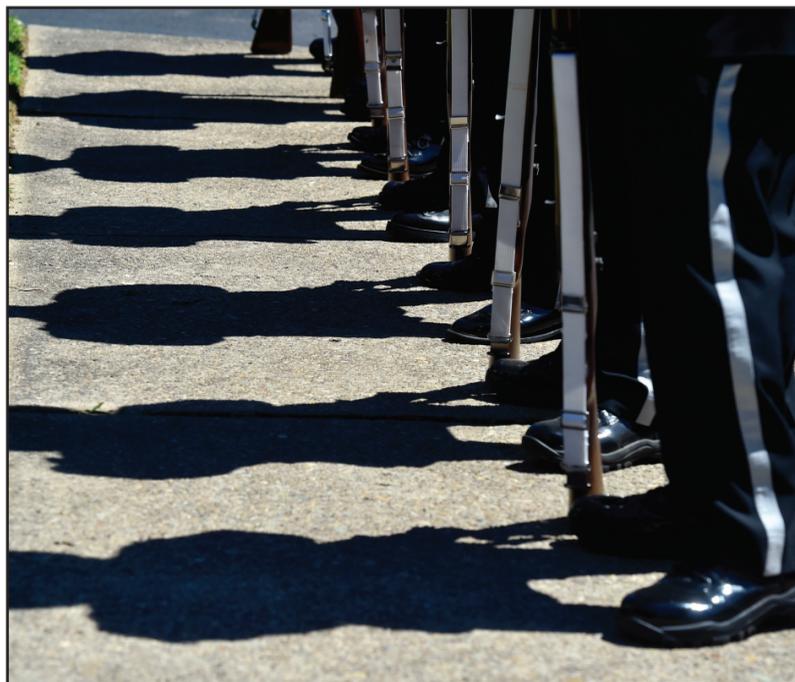
Pastor Jay E. Jones told the congregation to remember Erik and tell those stories.

"This is a loss for all of us — of courage, of love," he said. "We all share a common grief. Remembers, faith, love and hope last forever."



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Shavertown Volunteer Fire Department Chief Gary Beisel hands Michelle Sowga the helmet of her late husband Erik, who served as the department's assistant chief for many years. Sowga died last week, leaving behind his wife and three children.



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

The Pennsylvania Corrections Honor Guard stands outside of the Trucksville United Methodist Church where their co-worker Erik Sowga's funeral service took place Monday.

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# 'SMITH' from 6

There are fewer volunteers now, he said. "Some of it is the training required," he said. "And some of it is that people are working more than one job, and they don't have enough time."

Smith's career was not one of only active service, but also a certified fire instructor with the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy.

Smith said in addition to specific topics mandated for fire fighter training, he tried to share what he knew with others to equip them as fire fighters.

Kingston/Forty Fort Assistant Fire Chief Floyd Young knows the value of this training first hand.

Young, now 46, remembers being part of a rope rescue training at 18 with Smith as the instructor.

As part of the training, he was placed in a harness and was needed to let go and allow himself to fall from the side of the building.

But Young was scared.

Smith came up to him and said to him, "Listen, you're going to be alright . ." and he pushed him.

Young ended up upside down and unafraid.

"He taught me rope rescue in that moment," Young said.

Forty Fort mayor Andy Tuzinski said Smith has served as an example to other firefighters throughout his career.

"He started as a volunteer and he's a volunteer at heart," said Tuzin-



Submitted photo

Bob Smith and Floyd Young share a laugh while sitting on the bumper of Engine 21 recently.

ki. "He continues to work to keep the residents of the community safe."

Tuzinski said many Kingston Forty Fort career fire fighters volunteer in their hometowns on their own time.

"Bob was that example," he said. "He inspired other firemen."

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# Additional first responders nominated

The following first responders nominated by our readers are 'camera shy', but we still wanted to give them their Badge of Honor.

## BADGE OF HONOR DUSTIN POWERS

Dustin is a firefighter and paramedic.

## BADGE OF HONOR MARYANN ONDISK

Maryann is an EMS Instructor at LCCC / EMT at Slocum Township.

## BADGE OF HONOR SAMUEL DAVIS

Samuel is a Wilkes-Barre Police Officer.

## BADGE OF HONOR AMBER ELWOOD

Amber is a corrections officer.

## BADGE OF HONOR DETECTIVE JASON ZOLA

Jason is a retired Hazleton City Detective.

The City of Pittston would like to thank the  
Pittston City Police Department, Fire Department  
& The Greater Pittston Regional Ambulance  
... and everyone for their service  
throughout the year!

Thank you from Pittston City Officials

Mayor Michael Lombardo	Councilman Joe McLean
Councilman Michael Lombardo, Esq.	Controller Chris Latona
Councilman Kenneth Bangs	Treasurer Kathy Cunard
Councilman Danny Argo	Administrator Joseph Moskovitz
Community Development Director Joseph Chacke	

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