

WACCAMAW HAS COUNTY'S FIRST FEMALE CHIEF

Glenda Warren Says Fire Fighting's In Her Blood

BY DOUG RUTTER

Waccamaw Fire Chief Glenda Warren has more than 125 toy fire trucks in her home, but she doesn't play around when it comes to fighting real fires.

Like a soldier preparing for battle, she says adrenaline starts flowing through her body whenever a call comes in, and she immediately starts planning the attack.

A member of the local department for five years, Mrs. Warren says fire fighting is in her blood. Like a gambler who can't stop betting, she just loves fighting fire.

"It's the challenge of outdoing the fire, knowing that you can protect yourself and others," she said. "It's a good feeling to go in, knock the fire down and come out and have something to show for it."

Mrs. Warren, chief of the Waccamaw Volunteer Fire Department since last June, is apparently the first and only female fire chief in Brunswick County.

"It's scary," she said of her status. "But it's a good feeling to know people put that much trust in you that you can handle the job."

She was elected to the chief's post last year after her husband, Gregg Warren, stepped down. He had served two stints as chief for a total of five or six years.

Mrs. Warren said Waccamaw firefighters and those from other departments have supported her as chief, but there has been some good-natured kidding around. "I've been picked on a lot. But I can handle that too."

Mrs. Warren said she never thought she would be fire chief when a friend talked her into joining the department in the fall of 1985. She had two children at home at the time, but decided to give it a try.

At first she was training with seven other women who were available to fight fires during the day.

"I took to it. I enjoyed helping in the community," Mrs. Warren said. "It was exciting to start with, but the excitement sort of wears off after a while. You either like it or you don't."

The chief admits that being a volunteer fire fighter has its down side. "The worst thing is getting to a structure fire and knowing that you have no chance of saving it."

Mrs. Warren said one of the reasons she agreed to take over as chief was because her husband agreed to be assistant chief. She said there's a lot of responsibility in being chief. "All of those lives are in your hands."

As fire chief, Mrs. Warren usually drives a truck and operates equipment when she goes out on a call. The chief doesn't help fight the fire unless it's absolutely necessary.

"I'm kind of left out of the actual fire fighting and I miss that," she admits. "Overseeing the situation isn't any fun. The actual fun is fighting the fires."

Although she misses battling flames, Mrs. Warren said being chief isn't as physically demanding as being a firefighter. The chief usually is needed for her knowledge rather than her strength when the department responds to a fire.

"There is some heavy equipment to move," she said. "When you get 125 pounds of pressure going through a hose, it's not easy to handle. It's very strenuous work."

The Warren home at Ash is easy to spot for anyone who knows they're fire fighters. A miniature fire truck hangs from the mailbox, and a toy fire hydrant stands in the front yard.

Inside, house decorations include a variety of toy fire trucks that have been picked up over the years at flea markets and stores. A fireman climbs a ladder on one of the battery-operated trucks.

"We're really into it," Mrs. Warren admits. "There aren't many things that are fire-related that we miss."

The chief said she's always glad to see a new face in the department, but realizes they might not stick around long when they find out what being a volunteer firefighter is all about.

"It's not just picking up a hose and running with it," Mrs. Warren said. "When they find out there's some dirty digging work involved, that cools the excitement."

The chief trains about 500 hours a year, an average of 10 hours a week, with Waccamaw and other area fire departments. About a year ago, she said she was training five nights a week and every other Saturday.

Some volunteers give it up after the excitement wears off. People have been driven away from the department because of the many hours of training and relatively few hours fighting actual fires.

Gregg Warren said the firefighter's job is a lot like a police officer's job in that respect. "They train years and years and never pull their gun," he said. "When they need to, if the knowledge is there and they react properly, then they feel good."

The Warrens said it upsets them when people complain about how long it takes for the fire department or rescue squad to respond to a call.

They said area residents need to understand that firefighters and rescue workers are volunteers. When an emergency is called in, these people have to leave home or work and go to the department before responding to the call.

"The community as a whole doesn't care until it has a direct effect on them," Mrs. Warren said. "If those people who sit back and do a lot of the talking would just come, at least they would see what it's all about."

Even with the complaints, Mrs. Warren said she won't quit. "You feel a responsibility to go and help," she said. "You just go sometimes when you don't feel like you can go."

Mrs. Warren said the biggest challenge she has faced since becoming chief was responding to a house fire in the Longwood area by herself. She met a Calabash fire fighter and Brunswick County Emergency Management Coordinator Cecil Logan at the scene.

"It's a bad feeling to out to the building and have nobody to go with you," the chief said. "That just proves the point of how much people are needed."

There are 21 people on the Waccamaw VFD roster, with 14 or 15 active fire fighters. Mrs. Warren said the



WACCAMAW FIRE CHIEF GLENDA WARREN shows some of the toy fire trucks that decorate her home. She's the first known female fire chief in the county. STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

department needs at least 21 people on the roster to keep state certification. "That's why we beg," she said.

The Warrens said their family has been accused of trying to run the fire department. But they said they

would welcome anyone who is interested and is willing to put in the hours they do.

"We don't accept these jobs because we want to do it all," Warren said. "There's nobody else to do the job."

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