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Helping in secret: How Marietta firefighters quietly care for their own

By Abby Cope acope@mdjonline.com

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Abby Cope

From left: Firefighter engineer Austin Chappelle, Capt. Donny Reed, firefighter engineer Jamie Durocher, Lt. Luke Wilson, Assistant Chief Brian Rutledge and fireman Jose Vazquez stand in front of a fire engine at Marietta Fire Department.

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MARIETTA — Brian Rutledge, assistant chief of the Marietta Fire Department, calls it “helping in secret.”

“There’s a machismo around here that you can’t ask for help or show weakness,” Rutledge said.

The Marietta Firefighter Support Fund is a nonprofit to help families of first responders at the department. It began in the early 90s. In 2021, Lt. Luke Wilson reenergized the fund within the department. Department staff have an option to donate a portion of their monthly paycheck to the fund, which Wilson said most do.

The department also has the Marietta Firefighters Scholarship Fund to give scholarships to children of firefighters, active or retired.

Department led, community focused

The support fund assists firefighters in need due to physical ailments, a loss in the family, the birth of a baby or anything in between, Wilson said.

Wilson has been with the department for 16 years. He said the funds are a huge help to families, as firefighters “don’t make much money.”

The first year Wilson ran financials for the scholarship fund, the department awarded \$8,000. This year, they expect to award \$13,000.

Receiving help from the scholarship or support fund is a matter of asking, which Wilson said is often easier said than done in their line of work.

“They generally don’t reach out to us,” Wilson said. “Firefighters are hardheaded, and they’re not going to ask for help. It usually comes from someone they work with, on their engine or crew, noticing they’re having a hard time, and that person comes to us and tells us they need help.”

What started as mainly internal donations has gained community support over the past several years. Last year, the department reinstated its annual golf tournament to raise money for the scholarship fund. Now named the JW Fellabaum Classic, the tournament takes place annually on the first Thursday of October.

The tournament was named in honor of a founding member of the tournament.

“JW was a captain here at the fire department,” Rutledge said. “He was well loved by everyone. He was one of those guys that everybody wanted to be at his station. He has since passed, but he was a huge golf person, and developed the tournament as a fundraiser for the scholarship fund over 25 years ago.”

A lifeline for families

Wilson said he will always keep pushing for the funds because of the impact he’s seen it have on fellow firefighters.

“I had a man at my station whose wife gave birth — they lost their baby,” Wilson said. “They were having a really hard time, and we were trying to figure out ways we could help. We kept trying to talk to him but nothing was really working.”

Wilson said he received a phone call from the man asking for help purchasing a dog for his daughter, one that he could not afford on his own.

“I drove to Atlanta to pick it up and gave him the dog,” Wilson said. “The next day, he sent me a text, and it was a picture of his wife carrying the dog in a baby carrier. He said it was the first time she’d left the house since they got home from the hospital, and the first time he’d seen her smile since they got home.”

Wilson said the scholarship fund is a great help to families.

“Some of our men have four kids in college, so getting scholarships is a huge benefit when our salary is what it is.”

Wilson said the scholarship fund credits \$1,000 to the recipient's student account at the start of each school year. They plan on increasing that amount in coming years.

Capt. Donny Reed just sent his son, Carter, off to his senior year at University of Georgia. Reed said the scholarship has been a great help for his son.

"As firefighters, we're not used to getting help, we're used to helping people," Reed said. "These guys (Wilson and Rutledge) have done awesome things with this program."

To donate to the Marietta Firefighter Scholarship Fund, Marietta Firefighter Support Fund or sponsor the JW Fellabaum Classic, visit mfsf911.org.