

## Operation Fire Dog kicks off

By STEPHANIE UJHELYI, sujhelyi@the-review.com Published: December 26, 2015 3:00 AM



**REVIEW PHOTO//** Gayle E. Blair Presenting a check for Operation Fire Dog to help raise money for another accelerant - detection dog for the Alliance Fire Department are, center, business owners Joe Sarchione Jr. of Sarchione Auto Sales and Frank Minear of Frank's Family Restaurant. At the far left is Alliance Fire Chief Jason Hunt, and at far right is Alliance Fire Inspector Guy Aumend.

Business owner Frank Minear has made a challenge and hopes that other area citizens and businesses will follow Sarchione Auto Sales and Sarchione Chevrolet's lead.

Operation Fire Dog kicked off Monday as both Minear, on behalf of Frank's Family Restaurant, and Joe Sarchione Jr., on behalf of his family's business,

presented Alliance Fire Chief Jason Hunt with checks of \$1,000 each toward the purchase of another accelerant-sniffing dog.

Over Thanksgiving Day weekend, Alliance's beloved fire dog, Gretchen, was suddenly stricken ill and died. She was one of only five accelerant-sniffing dogs in the state of Ohio when acquired five years ago.

Her services have been set for 6:30 p.m. Jan. 13 at the Alliance Area Senior Center, according to her handler, Guy Aumend.

Gretchen proved herself indispensable, as Alliance saw a huge decline in the number of arsons after she was obtained in the summer of 2010.

One of the first fires that the yellow labrador worked was at the former Alliance Wholesalers, 335 Rush St., on July 4, 2010. That particular fire, which caused damage topping \$1.8 million, was ruled an arson. The fire also caused significant damage to PTC Alliance's rubber roof despite being separated from the old warehouse by an alley.

Alliance received assistance from 13 other departments, which helped to save PTC Alliance. During coverage of that fire, Hunt said, "We had to take a defensive posture due to the severity of the blaze. Every time a wall would collapse, embers would fly toward PTC. With seven aerials standing back-to-back, they were doing nothing but spraying water."

## OPERATION FIRE DOG CONTINUED...

In 2010, prior to Gretchen's arrival, Alliance Fire Inspector Aumend had already investigated 19 arsons by July. Those numbers dropped to seven the following year.

Aumend credits much of that decline to the fear of getting caught due to his canine partner's refined sniffer.

Both Minear and Sarchione believe that the community benefits from having such a trained dog on staff, so bringing one on board was a no-brainer for them.

It takes Aumend between five and seven hours to work over an entire ranch-style home solo, while a dog can do it in minutes.

"Arson dogs save time and money, because fewer (but better) samples saves money at the lab," according to State Farm Insurance's website. "At a fire scene, the dogs are encouraged to mingle with the crowds and give them a good sniff. If the arsonist is in the crowd watching (a common phenomenon), the arson dogs will alert to the smell of accelerant on their clothes, shoes or body."

Gretchen was the only trained dog in this area, traveling with Aumend to assist in

investigations throughout Stark, Mahoning and Portage counties.

She also worked on numerous fatal fires, including one in 2012 when Willie Hicks lost his life, and most recently in November at Maddrell Court Northeast in Canton, where an 8-year-old child died.

Alex Sarchione, whom Minear originally contacted when he made the challenge, said, "It is important that our fire department have every tool it can have, and Gretchen was a big part of not only the Alliance community, but also surrounding areas where she also assisted," she explained, adding that she realizes not every one can match the \$1,000 donations by Frank's Family Restaurant and the Sarchione family, but noting "every donation helps."

Purchasing a dog with accelerant detection training can cost up to \$10,000 with basic care and recertification, continuing through the dog's lifetime.

Hunt acknowledged that it is "humbling" to see this kind of generosity and support from the community. He said that the goal is to "establish a permanent fund to help and continue this program in perpetuity here in Alliance."

Donations to the effort can be sent to Operation Fire Dog, Alliance City Hall, 504 E. Main St., Alliance, OH 44601. Make checks payable to the Alliance Fire Department and write Operation Fire Dog on the memo line.

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