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## 'His life was serving people'

Long Beach firefighter dies of 9/11-related cancer

Posted July 13, 2019

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Michael Ornauer

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By Anthony Rifilato (<mailto:arifilato@liherald.com>)

Hundreds gathered at an emotional service in Rockville Centre on July 7 to say farewell to longtime Long Beach resident and firefighter Michael Ornauer, who died after a battle with 9/11-related cancer at age 60.

Ornauer was a captain in the Long Beach Fire Department who served as a volunteer for 30 years before his death on July 2.

"He was a huge personality in the fire service in Nassau County, Long Beach and throughout the state," said Ornauer's longtime friend, Long Beach Fire Commissioner Scott Kemins. "He was beloved within the department and county. He was always a very active member of our department and was chairman of our membership committee for many years, and he was in charge of organizing all the parades we used to have."

Kemins said that nearly 1,000 people, including firefighters and first responders from across the state, turned out for Ornauer's funeral service at Gutterman's in Rockville Centre. He was buried at Wellwood Cemetery in Farmingdale, and posthumously promoted to honorary fire chief.

Ornauer, who retired four years ago after a 26-year career as a Nassau County fire dispatcher, left an indelible mark on fire departments throughout New York, his friends and family said. Many described him as a friendly presence in the department and community, whether it was at the Maple Avenue firehouse — where he was a member of the floodlight company — dressing up as Santa Claus or organizing fundraisers for firefighters in need.

"The whole department was devastated once we learned he was sick and how fast it progressed," said Long Beach Fire Chief Rick DiGiacomo. "He was always there for everybody — and he was an all-around good guy, and if you needed something he was there for you."

"Mike was loved by firefighters near and far," the LBFD said on Facebook. "Although he was a humble man, he had a larger-than-life persona and a smile even greater. His presence would light up a room and his laughter was contagious. The Nassau County Fire Service lost a great man."

During his career, Ornauer, a 30-year Long Beach resident, responded to ground zero after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, and the crash of Avianca Flight 52 on Long Island's North Shore in 1990, which killed 73 people.

"We lost another 9/11 first responder," the Ray Pfeifer Foundation, a nonprofit foundation that assists first responders with medical needs, said on Twitter. "Our thoughts are with the family and friends of Long Beach Fire Department Captain Michael Ornauer."

Two weeks before his death, Ornauer's mother, Jane, whom he had lived with and cared for, died at age 92. Both were forced to evacuate their Franklin Boulevard home during Hurricane Sandy, which was flooded with more than three feet of water. Despite that, he was among the many firefighters who responded in the days after the storm to assist in emergency and recovery efforts.

"His life was serving people," said Ornauer's sister, SaraJo Ornauer, of East Meadow. "The fire department was his passion and always has been. It was always about trying to help people and be there for his community."

Ornauer also worked at the Nassau County Firefighters Museum and Education Center, the 10,000-square-foot facility that he lobbied to establish with a group of fellow firefighters before it opened in 2006 on Museum Row in Garden City, his sister said.

"He was instrumental in the ground-breaking and building of the museum," SaraJo said. "He worked as one of the guides — Mike had a vast knowledge of fire apparatus and fires that have happened. You get a couple of kids who are interested and you never know — you have a future fireman there, and he loved interacting and sharing his knowledge with people."

He was also president of the Nassau County Parade Officials and was a state parade official, overseeing or helping to coordinate many fire department parades and events, from anniversaries to funeral services.

"He was the go-to guy," DiGiacomo said. "At the end of the parade, he was always the voice up there speaking to the crowd and running it. He knew everybody — he's the only man I believe that throughout 71 fire departments in Nassau County, he knew everybody."

"Our joke was you weren't a Nassau County fireman unless Mike knew who you were," SaraJo added. "He was so involved in committees for the Long Beach Fire Department and throughout Nassau."

A Merrick native, Ornauer graduated from Sanford H. Calhoun High School and was a junior firefighter. At 18, he joined the Freeport Fire Department, where he served as a volunteer for 11 years before he moved to Long Beach.

"When he was 12 years old, he and a few of his friends would go to calls on their bikes, and watch fires and see how the firemen were responding," SaraJo said. "He became one of Merrick's first junior firemen. When he and some of his friends started to get their [drivers'] licenses, they would follow fire tucks at calls from Queens out to Riverhead. It was a learning experience — as he became a fireman, he put that knowledge to use."

Ornauer was a dispatcher for the Levittown Fire Department before he began working for Nassau County Fire Communications, or Firecom, where he fielded 911 calls and dispatched and provided information to 71 fire departments. He became affectionately known as Dispatcher 30.

"He did all the behind-the-scenes phone calls," DiGiacomo said. "He worked some large-scale responses. He was running command posts and knew what units to bring in for large-scale incidents, or helping the chief out running the scene — he was the guy in the back talking on the radio and sending units up."

"You will see stickers around Long Beach, and all they have is the No. 30 — they're all for Mike," his sister added.

When Avianca Flight 52 — a Boeing 707 carrying 149 passengers that ran out of fuel after a failed attempt to land at John F. Kennedy International Airport — crashed on a hillside on Jan. 25, 1990, in Cove Neck, Ornauer was among the hundreds of first responders at the scene and worked out of a mobile communications unit.

"He was sent up there to help coordinate that effort," SaraJo said. "There were so many challenges with that recovery because it was on the North Shore and a lot of the road accessibility was very limited. So you're trying to get 15 to 20 departments there with all kinds of fire trucks — they're trying to get every piece of equipment up there to get the fire out and rescue people."

On 9/11, Ornauer also rushed to ground zero with members of the Long Beach Fire Department, and immediately began helping to coordinate communications efforts there out of a mobile field unit.

"He was actually put in charge of field communications, telling people where to go on the pile, and which department should go where," SaraJo said. "They were working days upon days in a row because there were so many departments trying to respond and help with rescue, recovery and cleanup. When you go down there and know there are people missing and people that you know and love, you give everything you've got — you want to get them out."

SaraJo said that when Ornauer did have a day off in the aftermath of the attacks, he was often attending funerals for fellow firefighters, some of which he helped coordinate.

"Everyday there was another funeral," she said. "It was difficult for him because he wanted to be at all of them — everyone who passed meant something to him."

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