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Tribute to a fallen colleague

'Firefighter's firefighter' eulogized

By KEVIN MURPHY The Kansas City Star

"To him, providing for his family was the most important thing in his life."

Elain Hubbard on her brother Gerald McGowan





AARON LINDBERG/Special to The Star

AARON LINDBERG/Special to The Star Firefighters blocked streets in Raytown on Saturday to allow fire trucks, police cars and mourners' vehicles to travel to the burial site of Kansas City firefighter Gerald McGowan. The firefighters saluted as the vehicles passed. McGowan died last Sunday of injuries suffered in a crash involving a fire truck.

To colleagues, Gerald "Mac" McGowan was a model firefighter with a stellar reputation for skill and safety.

To friends and relatives, he was a quiet example of devotion and sacrifice.

Some 700 persons paid their respects Saturday to McGowan, who died a week ago when the fire truck in which he was riding crashed on its way to a fire call in Kansas City.

"Mac McGowan was a firefighter's firefighter," Kansas City Fire Chief Smokey Dyer said at the funeral. "There is no higher honor that any of us in firefighting could ever hope to achieve."

Hundreds of firefighters, police officers, city officials and others attended McGowan's funeral at the Music Hall in Kansas City. McGowan, 57, was a 32-year veteran of the department.

McGowan died last Sunday evening. Normally a driver, McGowan was a passenger and filling in as acting captain on a pumper truck that struck a car on Blue Ridge Boulevard at 81st Terrace and slammed into a tree.

Dyer called McGowan a "consummate driver" who never brought a truck back with so much as a scratch. For most of his 32 years, he worked at the city's busiest station at 2039 Hardesty Ave. but got a transfer recently to 7504 E. 67th St.

Dyer said McGowan was an expert firefighter, dousing blazes with efficiency, and was a mentor to his colleagues.

Louie Wright, president of Local 42 of the International Association of Fire Fighters, said McGowan was the 100th Kansas City firefighter to die in the line of duty.

Noting that the funeral was on the third anniversary of the terrorist attacks in New York that killed 343 firefighters, Wright said McGowan's death is another reminder of the danger of their work.

"There is no safe post," Wright said. "There is no routine call."

McGowan's sister, Elain Hubbard, said her brother was known to be a man of few words but liked to joke and tease.

McGowan served in the Vietnam War for 13 months, winning three medals that even his family did not know about until after he died, Hubbard said. He was a person who preferred the shadows to the limelight, she said.

McGowan's survivors include his wife, Margaret McGowan; two sons, Kevin and Michael McGowan; and a young granddaughter.

McGowan worked odd jobs, such as siding work and pest control, to pay for sending his sons to private high schools, Hubbard said.

"To him, providing for his family was the most important thing in his life," Hubbard said.

In the accident that took McGowan's life, the fire truck was attempting to pass a car on the left when the car turned left into its path. The fire truck driver was not deemed at fault.

Although the driver of the car that the truck hit has not been charged, Hubbard took the opportunity at the funeral to give some safety advice to motorists.

"Please, oh please," she said, "yield to all emergency vehicles."

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First glance

• *A funeral is held for Kansas City firefighter Gerald McGowan, who died last week after a traffic accident while riding in a fire truck heading to a fire call.*