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Firefighters honor 'an icon'

Victim of wreck 'was constantly teaching,' they say

By MARK DAVIS The Kansas City Star



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

A makeshift memorial to Gerald McGowan marks the site where he was killed Sunday. Amid balloons, flags and other tributes, David Whittington and his son Rusty cleaned broken glass from the area.



McGowan



Kansas City firefighters spoke about their fallen brother Monday, less than 24 hours after Gerald K. McGowan died in a traffic accident on the way to a fire.

McGowan, known as "Mac" to firefighters, was a 32-year veteran who was making plans to retire by the end of the year. He usually drove Pumper 33 for the B shift but was filling in as acting captain Sunday when the station responded to an apartment fire shortly after 5 p.m.

Minutes later, the fire truck collided with two cars and crashed into a tree. Police have said the pumper's driver was not at fault.

"Mac loved to drive the rig," said Capt. Zac Weddle, who worked with McGowan at Station 24 until about a year ago. "He rode out of class, as captain, to help the district."

McGowan, 57, spent most of his career as a fire apparatus operator at Station 24 rather than seek to advance.

"To advance would mean he would have to leave 24. He was an icon at that station. He will always be an icon at that station," Weddle said.

But in August of last year, McGowan traded posts with a driver at Station 33. The switch put McGowan in a less-active station and gave the younger driver the opportunity to work in one of the city's busiest.

Stan Williams, the driver who took McGowan's seat behind the wheel of Pumper 33 on Sunday, was another veteran with whom McGowan had worked for 16 years at Station 24.

"He took care of me. He taught me how to drive a pumper," Williams said Monday. "He was constantly teaching."

Williams, urged by McGowan to take the exam, had been promoted to fire apparatus operator and worked as a

floating driver. He said Monday that he took assignments at Station 33 whenever he could because he knew McGowan would be there.

Williams, 47, said McGowan had helped him through personal difficulties, including a divorce.

"He was just like a father to me. He'd put his arms around me and get me through it," Williams said. "I'm having a tough time dealing with it, but I'll get through it."

Williams and Firefighter Leroie D. Workcuff, 30, both had been treated and released from St. Joseph Health Center on Sunday.

Firefighter John H. Parison, 29, stayed overnight at the University of Kansas Hospital and was released Monday morning, the department said.

Police said the accident occurred about 5:15 p.m. Sunday as the pumper was en route to an apartment fire at 9828 Willow Ave. The fire was a minor one.

Pumper 33 was heading south on Blue Ridge Boulevard and tried to swerve around a car that had slowed to make a left-hand turn into a driveway.

The vehicles collided and the fire truck also hit a northbound car that had stopped on the far right side of the street.

The pumper, unable to stop, sheared a utility pole in half and crashed into a tree.

"In this business, there is no safe post and there is no routine call," said Louie Wright, president of International Association of Fire Fighters Local 42.

Mike McGowan, one of Gerald McGowan's two sons, also is a Kansas City firefighter.

Information about services was not available Monday.

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