



By Mike Maple

Firefighters from Station 10, Lt. Trent Kirk's station, bear their colleague's casket from Memphis Funeral Home Germantown Parkway for the procession to Bellevue Baptist Church Thursday morning.

2 showed 'measure of human greatness'

'We were doing what we loved'

By Laura Coleman Noeth

noeth@gomemphis.com

June 20, 2003

It was a 10-hour day for Carla Redwine of Collierville, a day to weep softly, pray quietly and feel unspeakable gratitude that she wasn't one of the women in the first row.

Redwine, 33, and her son Phillip, 12, sat a few rows away from her husband, Lt. Herman Redwine, 35. He joined about 2,500 fellow firefighters at Bellevue Baptist Church for a day of mourning Thursday as Lt. Trent Kirk and Pvt. Charles Zachary, both 39, were eulogized, honored and laid to rest.

The two died after the roof of the burning Family Dollar store in Frayser collapsed on them Sunday night.

That night, when Redwine couldn't see his hand in front of his face, when the heat hit him from all sides, when his tank ran out of air and when he begged his fellow firefighters for help, Redwine narrowly avoided being in a flag-draped casket accompanied by bagpipers.

Because all of the firefighters attending the funerals knew it could have been them, they were there.

Because spouses knew it could be their loved ones being put to rest, they were there.

And because all the others knew what Kirk and Zachary and other firefighters do every day, they were there for two renditions of Amazing Grace and taps, two color guard processions, and two eulogies.

Those who didn't come inside, didn't know the dead or weren't even close to firefighters showed up near the church to honor the men anyway.

"I just wanted to come and show my respect," said Kim Parsley, 28, of Cordova, who parked near Belle vue's entrance so she could see Kirk's casket arrive atop a fire engine. "It's so sad. You have a lot of respect for the guys who put their lives on the line and do this every day."

Greg Bolton drove from his Collierville job to stand at Macon and Whitten during his lunch hour. He was disappointed to see only about a dozen others at the intersection.

"The whole route should be lined with people," he said.

Officials estimated about 3,500 attended each funeral.

Between the two services, workers replaced Kirk's flowers, programs and guest books with Zachary's.

Some firefighters grabbed a cold drink to prepare to stand at attention, once again, when a fire engine carrying Zachary's casket made its way along the church's winding drive.

Others embraced colleagues they seem to see only at funerals.

Before the services began, George Collier, a Memphis firefighter for 11 years, prepared to play taps once again. It's not that difficult a song to play, he insisted, unless he's playing it for a fallen firefighter.

He was going to try not to get emotional while playing, but he wasn't going to worry if he did.

"A real man will cry, so if I have to, I will," he said, adjusting the satin ascot of his color guard uniform.

On the side of the sanctuary reserved for firefighters' families, Carla and Phillip Redwine took their seats long before Kirk's service began and returned to the same seats for Zachary's service.

She looked for her husband as a seemingly endless flow of men and women in their dress blues filed into the church amid piercing silence.

He was her high school sweet heart, the volunteer firefighter she married 13 years ago who joined the Memphis department a year later.

And the man she feared was among those missing Sunday night. Finally, about 10:30 p.m., he called.

"I just wanted to hear your voice," he told her, sobbing uncontrollably.

Before Kirk's service began, Herman Redwine talked about what happened. Because he's a member of the department's team trained to rescue trapped firefighters, his unit responded to the first of the three alarms.

"It looked like a routine fire," he said. "But in seconds, it got real bad."

Redwine said his team was able to get Timothy Scott out.

"But we went back because we knew we had a lieutenant down," he said.

Redwine, having put his air mask on Scott as Scott was being taken out, ran out of air and couldn't breathe.

"I didn't do anything any other fireman wouldn't do," he said. "Then I told them to come get me. I said, 'Don't leave me.' "

After taking her seat and waiting for the Kirk service to begin, Carla Redwine struggled to express her feelings knowing that her husband came so close to perishing with Kirk and Zachary.

"I'm speechless, I can't think of how to say it," she said.

Then she and Phillip, who wants to become a firefighter, listened as Kirk and Zachary's friends spoke, sobbed and sometimes laughed as they remembered the two.

"We've truly lost a great man," said Lt. Steve Dew, who worked with Kirk.

Among the stories Dew told was one about how they once had to chop a hole in the roof of a burning house in 95-degree heat.

"I was half out of breath and I said to him, 'Great job, isn't it?' He looked at me with that big grin and said, 'This is the best job in the world.' "

When the tributes ended, Kirk's wife, Donna, and daughters, Hope, 14, and Charity, 8, came to the stage, and many of those trying to stifle tears gave up.

"I want to thank everybody for trying to get my daddy out," said Charity, stretching to reach the microphone.

Donna Kirk and Frances Zachary each received the International Association of Fire Fighters' medal of honor from the union's general president, Harold Schaitberger, who lauded both men's bravery, calling it "a measure of humangreatness."

It was nearly 4 p.m. when the auditorium again grew silent as bagpipers led Zachary's casket into the church and firefighters filed in.

Most had been there for Kirk's funeral, but Tonya Pike arrived in time for Zachary's. She and her husband had been friends with Zachary, a former neighbor, for several years, going on cruises together.

But Ricky Pike missed the funeral so he could supervise the crew digging Zachary's grave at a Millington cemetery.

"Frances asked him to do that," Pike said.

Those remembering Zachary made repeated references to his pranks, but just as quickly cited his dedication to the job.

"You can take heart," Schaitberger told Zachary's family, "that he really did die doing something that mattered."

Then after another sermon, another procession, it was time for Carla Redwine to find her husband and go to the cemetery a second time.

But not before she had a chance to reflect on how one scary night and one very long day of grief will affect the couple forever.

"It makes me proud to say my husband does what he does," she said. "It makes me appreciate him so much more."

- Laura Coleman Noeth: 529-5853