

LOCAL NEWS

Retired Stillwater firefighters gather monthly for coffee, breakfast — and stories

Fire Chief Stuart Glaser started the breakfasts as a way for former firefighters to stay connected



Retired Stillwater firefighters Rob Zoller, left, and Kevin Moelter examine the new Stillwater Fire Department special-operations vehicle after eating breakfast at the department in Stillwater on Thursday, Sept. 4, 2025. Department retirees are invited to stop by the department monthly for breakfast and coffee. Fire Chief Stuart Glaser started the breakfasts in May 2024 as a way to stay connected with former firefighters. (Kathryn Kovalenko / Pioneer Press)



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Retired Stillwater firefighters Jon Conati and Ron Axdahl sat next to each other at breakfast on Thursday morning and talk soon turned to the most traumatic call they ever went on.

The fire at Brine's Meat Market on Main Street in downtown Stillwater on Jan. 22, 1982, caused the death of two firefighters from the Mahtomedi Fire Department. A Stillwater firefighter, Kevin Charlsen, nearly perished.

"I was on my way home when the call came in," Conati recalled. "I came in on the second truck, and I immediately started laying lines. We went around to the back and started working from the back on one of the buildings. ... It was a big fire. I was there 21 hours."

Said Axdahl: "It was snowing like mad the night of the fire. We had a big snowstorm. I'll never forget it."

Conati and Axdahl are part of a group of about 15 retired firefighters who gather at the Stillwater Fire Department on Maryknoll Road for breakfast and coffee on the first Thursday of the month.

Fire Chief Stuart Glaser started the breakfasts — sometimes egg bake and hash browns, sometimes just coffee and donuts — in May 2024 as a way for former firefighters to stay connected after they left the department.

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Bernie Peltier is a regular attendee; he's 93. So is Tim "T.J." Bell, [who retired in 2020 after 51 years on the department](#); he is believed to still hold the record for longest-tenured volunteer firefighter in Minnesota.

"They've been great," Bell said of the monthly gatherings. "I think I've missed only one. We get a few who come from quite a distance to make it every month. One guy drives down from Moose Lake; another comes from North Branch. We talk about the old days, and talk about our aches and pains."

'A brotherhood'

Firefighters are a tight-knit group because everything they do involves teamwork, Bell said, and the monthly gatherings help the men maintain their bonds.

"If you don't get together, you lose track of people and what's going on," he said. "Getting older and losing contact with people and everything, it's rough on people. It's not a good thing to do. You have to have a social life. Who better to socialize than your old friends that you normally wouldn't see otherwise?"



Mary Ellen Peltier, left, and Bernard Peltier eat breakfast with a group of other retired Stillwater firefighters on Thursday. (Kathryn Kovalenko / Pioneer Press)

The breakfasts can be family affairs: Bernie Peltier's son, Billy, just retired from the department. He drives his father and his mother, Mary Ellen, to the gathering each month. His brother, Robert, is still on the department.

"I'm the good-looking one," Steve Glaser said.

"He's the smart one," Bell said.

Steve Glaser retired in 1994 after 20 years with the department. "It's a brotherhood with the fire department," he said. "This group of guys that are retired, we fought the Brine's fire together and some of the bigger fires in the (St. Croix River) Valley. The department now has grown, and they've got this nice new station and everything, and it's just nice to be a part of it. We keep up with what's going on in the Valley."

Bell was Steve Glaser's captain when he was on the department; Glaser was his engineer.

"One of the very first runs I was on, Tim was there to see to it that I didn't get myself in trouble while I was in my apprenticeship," Glaser said.

"Yeah, and after 20 years, I still had to do that," Bell said.

Bell did the math on Thursday and determined that the men who attended Thursday's gathering had a combined 298 years of service on the department.

"All of them committed their time, lives and energy protecting the community they lived in," Stu Glaser said. "Firefighting is one of those jobs where you know immediately if you have made a difference. You're there to help somebody when they're in need. Literally.

"We've been there for somebody taking their first breath because we've been there when babies have been born at home, and we have been there when somebody has taken their last. I don't know how you can kind of wrap your arms around that as a career because these guys touched hundreds and hundreds of lives. Sometimes you don't even realize the impact you're making. It's a good career."

Swapping stories

The group, which includes a few wives and widows, generally gathers for about an hour in the department's meeting room. The fire department provides the treats. On Thursday, Judy Brueghel, the department's fire services specialist, made coffee, two egg bakes, zucchini bread and bacon and prepped the strawberries and blueberries.

"I used to do day care," she said. "This egg bake is potatoes with peppers and Canadian bacon and, of course, cheese. The other is hash browns and sausage with a little bit of sour cream added to it."

Brueghel worked with Stu Glaser to launch the monthly gatherings, she said. “We wanted a way to get everybody back together,” she said. “It’s fun to see them come in and enjoy themselves. If it wasn’t for these guys, we wouldn’t be here. You need to let them know that they’re important, and they mean a lot. We also send out a quarterly newsletter to keep them involved. They’re part of the family.”

After breakfast on Thursday, the group followed Stu Glaser out to the parking lot for a tour of the department’s new \$600,000 special-operations vehicle (Rescue 2). The truck, built by Custom Fire Apparatus of Osceola, Wis., will soon replace the 36-year-old rescue vehicle currently in service, Glaser explained.



From left, Mary Ness, Kevin Moelter and Rob Zoller look at the Stillwater Fire Department's new special-operations vehicle with Fire Chief Stuart Glaser, second from right. (Kathryn Kovalenko / Pioneer Press)

“It’s got command-post capabilities, improved scene lighting, dive and water-rescue equipment and a high-definition remote camera,” Glaser said. “It also has the ability to be used as a rehabilitation location for firefighters during an event.”

Bernie Peltier, the oldest of the retired firefighters, looked up at the new rig with admiration.

“It’s a lot different than the ones we had,” he said.

Peltier said he remembered one of the largest fires the St. Croix Valley has seen: the Stillwater High School fire on Dec. 23, 1957. School was out for the holiday break, and

Retired firefighter Kevin Moelter said he, too, remembered the blaze. "It was on my 6th birthday that it burned," he said. "I remember we went down there. We were standing on the (Washington County) Courthouse steps (on West Pine Street). It was so hot, we had to stand behind the pillars because it was just so warm."

Stu Glaser said he is glad the retired firefighters now have a place to swap stories each month.

"These individuals who worked ahead of us kind of paved the way, and now we have a bunch of new firefighters who just joined the department," he said. "This gives us an opportunity to share stories and talk about the past and the things they did and where we are today, so people keep that connection."

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