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# St. Brendan Church honors fallen firefighter

## 50 years after fatal fire, East Providence firefighter eulogized for his sacrifice

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BY EMILY DONOHUE, STAFF REPORTER

EAST PROVIDENCE - Around 1 a.m. on July 10, 1957 a passerby noticed smoke pouring out of St. Brendan Church in East Providence. He notified a patrolman, who called in the first alarm. Within minutes, the quiet Riverside neighborhood was hectic with fire trucks, policemen, neighbors and St. Brendan parishioners trying to save the church.

Fire companies from across the state were called to battle the blaze that was consuming the wooden structure.

Assistant pastor Father Frederick J. Rogers was in the rectory when the fire broke out, and was the second to call in an alarm. He and a few parishioners had just enough time to remove the Blessed Sacrament and some other valuables from the church before the building was engulfed in flames, according to a Providence Journal Evening Bulletin story at that time.

Despite the efforts of firefighters, the fire raged for nearly three hours before it was declared under control.

Lt. Robert McPherson, 51, was one of the many East Providence firefighters called to the scene. He and two other men from his company went inside the burning structure to combat the fire.

The other firefighters believe that Lt. McPherson took a wrong turn while inside the building and wound up going downstairs into the basement, where he was overcome by smoke.

His body was carried from the church and he was given CPR by two men even after a neighbor, Dr. George Smith, pronounced McPherson dead.

By 3 a.m. the church, built in 1905 as a mission church, was a total loss. Attempts to revive McPherson were stopped and two other firefighters were brought to the hospital with injuries.

The St. Brendan parish began moving forward immediately. The altar and several statues were moved into the school's gymnasium, where church services were held until construction on the new church was completed in 1969.

The new church sits on the same property as the original did and features a marble baptismal font and rose window salvaged from the burned building.

Since 1969 parishioners have continued to worship at their neighborhood church. Baptisms, weddings and funerals continued and parish life carried on and flourished.

But there was one major oversight, a nagging lapse that Father John Unsworth, current pastor at St. Brendan, could not ignore. The memory of Lt. McPherson, who gave his life trying to save the church, had never been properly honored. Fr. Unsworth is particularly conscious of the risks firefighters take everyday. His father, John Unsworth, was one of the East Providence fire fighters who responded to the 1957 church fire, and he eventually became the East Providence fire chief. Fr. Unsworth is also the fire department's chaplain.

"Each year on July 10, I would head up to Little Neck Cemetery and have flowers placed on his grave," said Fr. Unsworth of McPherson. He remembered the man who died and wanted to let others have the opportunity to remember him formally as well.

This July 10 marked the 50th anniversary of the fire. For Fr. Unsworth, it was an anniversary that "we could not let pass by."

He planned a memorial service to honor the fallen firefighter and dedicate the salvaged rose window in McPherson's memory.

Battalions of firefighters from across East Providence, including a color guard, bagpiper and two fire-trucks turned out for the memorial service, along with more than 50 parishioners, retired firefighters, friends and family of Lt. McPherson. The crowd gathered outside the church on the sunny Saturday morning to listen to speeches, exchange stories and to honor the sacrifice that Lt. McPherson made in an effort to save the church.

East Providence Mayor Isadore S. Ramos was among the speakers at the ceremony, "I thank the McPherson family for the gift of Robert, whom we shall never forget," he said.

That sentiment was echoed by current East Providence Fire Chief Joseph J. Klucznik, who vowed that McPherson "will always have a special place in our house."

Klucznik and other firefighters spoke of their brotherhood and the lifelong bond that is created by the shared risk of their profession. That bond was particularly evident in the large group of retired firefighters and their wives who came out to honor McPherson's memory. All had responded to the 1957 fire and remembered McPherson personally as a hardworking and brave fire fighter and as a good friend.

Fr. Unsworth presented McPherson's son, Robert F. McPherson, with a plaque commemorating the sacrifice made by his father, which was then hung in the church next to the rose window. "Fifty years ago on the night of that fire the McPherson family lost someone they loved, but the fire department lost someone they were very close to, too," Fr. Unsworth said during the presentation.

The rose window depicts St. Brendan, a fourth century Irish monk, giving Holy Communion to a group of kneeling sailors aboard a ship. Although St. Brendan is not a particularly popular saint in the United States, Irish immigrants who lived in East Providence at the turn of the 20th century would have certainly known him well. St. Brendan is the patron saint of County Kerry in Ireland; and the Cathedral of Tralee, in Kerry, is named after him. Although the exact details are not known, Fr. Unsworth suspects that the original pastor of the church was from Kerry and named his new church after his county's patron saint.

Following the presentation of the plaque and an explanation of the scene depicted in the window, Rev. Eugene Dyszlewski, pastor of the Congregational Church of Riverside where McPherson was a member until his death, offered a benediction which was followed by a stirring rendition of "Taps" on the bagpipe.

Guests were invited into the church to view the rose window and then shared stories and refreshments

outdoors.

Robert McPherson was greeted by many of his father's former co-workers and friends. He said he plans to come by the church occasionally to visit the window dedicated to his father. "He would have been honored," he said of his father.

McPherson was 12 at the time his dad lost his life. He grew up in East Providence with his mother, Vera, and his sister. He moved to Michigan for a few years but recently returned to East Providence, where he plans to remain.

George Page was one of the firefighters who responded in 1957, and said he came to St. Brendan to honor his fellow firefighter's memory. "We all know each other well," he said. According to the original article in the July 10, 1957 edition of the Providence Journal Bulletin an investigation was immediately launched into the cause of the fire. Despite reports of a suspicious car parked in the church's lot immediately before the fire that gave rise to rumors of arson, Page said that no exact cause for the fire was ever determined. Other newspaper reports cited faulty wiring as the cause.

Lt. McPherson was the last East Providence fire fighter to die in the line of duty to date.

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