

Saluting our

Firefighters



September 3, 2026

A special section of the Addison Independent

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Mike Collette: Vergennes Fire Department's historian

By SOPHIA KESHMIRI

VERGENNES — From the opposite side of the room, Mike Collette can point to one of the numerous images decorating the walls in the basement of the Vergennes

service remains a significant part of his life.

“He comes to trainings and certainly our community events. Due to his age, he has slowed down. He’s not the first

He called the trade “hereditary.”

Not only did his grandfather and father-in-law answer the call — so did Collette’s father, brothers, and for a time his wife, Jackman’s daughter.

When asked what made him initially join in 1961, Collette acknowledged the images on the table in front of him and answered simply, “probably one of these guys.”

What does Collette enjoy about firefighting?

“It’s dangerous now, as it was then, but it’s a civic duty to the community,” he said.

He’s not one to gloss over the intensity of the work.

“We’ve had some good fires. I have seen a lot in my day,” he said. “Sometimes you have to just go home and cry because they bother you so bad.”

While Collette has amassed a book-worth of experiences firefighting, he’s also collected decades worth of observations on the change and growth of a crucial service, both far-reaching measures and locally.

Though fighting fires is still dangerous, improvements in technology, training and protocols have made the job safer than it once was.

The Vergennes department has expanded as well.

“They’re a great bunch of guys,” Collette said. “There’s 40 of them. When I came in in 1961, well, there was probably anywhere from 15 to 18 volunteers.”

When prompted about his favorite aspect of the job, Collette’s mind goes to the people he serves alongside.

“I’m proud of them,” he said. “Proud of this department, where it’s come from.”

PRESERVING HISTORY

Among the collection of documents Collette brought to the fire station this summer were a copy of the VFD bylaws and two other packets explaining parts of the Vergennes Fire Department’s history.

Collette made sure to point out that these offerings were just a small subset of the records he has stored in his collection at home.

One of the roles Collette has assumed is preserving the volunteer organization’s storied past. He’s responsible for much of the memorabilia adorning the walls, and filling trophy cases he built, in the Vergennes fire station basement.

A piece of history that he wants people to remember is the story of volunteer firefighter

Leigh Schroeder, who was thrown from a firetruck while responding to call in 1948. He died from the injuries he suffered in the line of duty.

“He was my dad’s best friend,” Collette recounted.

“Mike is a wealth of knowledge,” DiBiase said. “He’s also somebody that he can always put a smile on your face and crack a joke at any given moment, and certainly in the places that you least expect it.”

Collette’s contribution to maintaining that history is far more than a feel-good project.

“He can just tell us about those things and it helps us understand,” DiBiase said.

“We’re pretty lucky to see where we’ve come to and what we have today, as well as him going, ‘Guys, we’ve always progressed. That’s always been what we’ve done. We’ve always just gone through and gone to the next thing and gotten better every time we do it.’ So Mike’s ability to add that outlook on the department is always helpful.”

Collette wondered, with a chuckle, why DiBiase keeps him on the 40-person roster.

“Ain’t figured it out yet,” he joked.

For the chief, Collette’s contributions are invaluable:

“I don’t know how we’d do it without him.”

“We always make sure we find a place for (Mike Collette) to be useful and helpful. And it’s not hard to do because he’s a guy that is willing to do anything to this day.”

— Vergennes Fire Chief David DiBiase



VERGENNES FIRE DEPARTMENT members Mike Collette, left, and Dean Gilmore show off a banner celebrating the department's sesquicentennial. As of this past summer, volunteers have provided fire protection to Vergennes for 150 years.

Independent photo/John S. McCright

Fire Station and provide a verbal caption. That extends to the fire station itself.

“This building was the gym to the high school until 1959,” he told a recent visitor while motioning to the vast space where the Vergennes Fire Department trucks are parked. “The ag department was downstairs. That’s were Ray Davison taught.”

Collette, of course, was referring to firefighter who served the county for 46 years not just putting out blazes, but also improving the training of firefighters not just locally, but throughout the region.

Collette’s knowledge extends beyond the people in the local fire service; he can recite the decade the Little City’s firefighters wore the uniform dressing a mannequin in another corner of the station.

And if given the chance to share why the bucket hanging from a hook a few steps away is rounded, not flat on the bottom, he’s likely to explain the hardcore rationale of his hoseless predecessors — bucket brigaders wouldn’t be tempted to set down a vessel with a curved base because it would spill the much-needed contents.

After 65-years volunteering with the department, the 84-year-old, whose red pickup truck matches the hue of the massive apparatuses inside the VFD garage, doesn’t just rattle off dates, facts and tenets about the profession. He speaks “fire,” and VFD history, like it’s his mother tongue.

Collette’s name has been a fixture of the Vergennes Fire Department roster since 1961. And after 65 years in the field, the

one out the door generally, but he will certainly still respond to calls and offer whatever assistance that he can,” Chief David DiBiase said.

“And we always make sure we find a place for him to be useful and helpful. And it’s not hard to do because he’s a guy that is willing to do anything to this day.”

While still being involved in the day-to-day work of a volunteer firefighter, Collette has grown into a role only somebody with decades of experience could.

“He’s an anchor for the fire department when it comes to acknowledging our history and also welcoming the future,” DiBiase said.

“He’s a gentleman that obviously has seen a lot of change in the fire service, but he’s also not stuck in the old ways. And as much as he likes to make sure that we remember, he always supports us in the new technology and the new endeavors and the future path of Vergennes Fire Department. So, he’s certainly an inspiration to me.”

FAMILY OF FIREFIGHTERS

Collette came to the fire station for an interview this summer equipped with prints of family members dressed in firefighter uniforms.

One showed his father-in-law, Ralph Jackman, who served as chief for many years. And another of his son, a career firefighter who currently heads the Williston Fire Department. Collette’s grandfather also served.

Collette, a third-generation VFD member, attributes the longevity of his stay with the organization to being surrounded by firefighting his whole life.



LONGTIME VERGENNES FIREFIGHTER Mike Collette points to a mannequin in the city fire station while explaining how an early breathing device operated to help firefighters battle smokey blazes up close. Despite his love of the past, Collette is up on the latest firefighting technologies and advocates for their use.

Independent photo/John S. McCright



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- | | | | | | | |
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- Richard Gomez**, Monkton Lieutenant
- Zach Welch**, Bridport Firefighter
- Taylor Betourney**, Bridport Auxiliary

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| Richard Coursey | Michael Lawton | Richard Shimel | Keith Betourney | Tyler Audet | Anthony Korda | |
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Mason Atkins
Chelsea Bashaw
Jesse Bashaw

Grady Brokaw
Matt Brown
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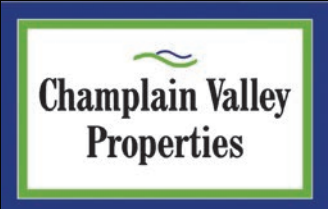
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Bridport Ladies Auxiliary revives the decades-long tradition of supporting their firefighters

By ELOISE CHRISTY

BRIDPORT — Founded in 1961, the Bridport Ladies Auxiliary has supported the Bridport Volunteer Fire Department for decades, but as people got busier, the group became quiet for a time. Revived in 2023, the auxiliary has grown into a group of volunteers who organize community events, raise money for equipment, provide food and refreshments at emergency scenes and support the department's firefighters on and off duty.

Current members include Tricia Gordon, Katie Welch, Taylor Betourney, Liz Bordreau, Laurie Pratt, Mary Beth Novosel, JoAnna Cater, Joanne Reynolds, Katie Shimel, Tajah Marsden, Sophia Welch and Nicole Reilly. The auxiliary also recognizes Sherry Ouellette, who died in May, as a fundamental member of the auxiliary.

"I think initially back in the day when the ladies auxiliary existed, it was more for support when the firemen were out fighting a fire," Tricia Gordon said. "Making sure they had coffee on a cold night or their bellies were full. We're that as well, but we do a lot of fundraising for them because it's all volunteer."

Members say supporting both the fire department and the Bridport community is at the heart of everything they do. The Bridport Ladies Auxiliary is the only ladies auxiliary in Addison County and one of the very few that exist in all of Vermont.

"This is my second family," one of the youngest members of the auxiliary Taylor Betourney said. "I used to work at Pratt's (Store) and that's a whole sense of community, and now I work in Middlebury and I didn't find that community anymore. So this keeps me involved, which I really enjoy. Just doing anything I can to support my family."

Betourney is not the only one who sees this auxiliary as more than a

volunteer organization — they all do. For many members, supporting the Bridport Volunteer Fire Department also means supporting their own families and neighbors.

"One of the big things about this fire department is it's family," Mary Beth Novosel said. "It goes back generations. We have some firemen that — I mean, it's just generation after generation. You'll find fathers, sons. It's very much a family and community-oriented department."

This sense of family that is cultivated in the ladies auxiliary is also reflected in the work they do. Members organize around one fundraiser a month, varying from bingo nights and paint-and-sip events to community lunches, all aiming to raise money for the volunteer fire department. One key role the auxiliary performs is providing food and drinks for the firefighters during long emergencies. They stock bins with snacks,

water and coffee and deliver meals to the crew while they work on fire emergencies.

Although many of the members have relatives or spouses in the department, auxiliary membership is not limited to firefighters' families.

"It's important to also note that you don't have to be a wife of a fire department member," Liz Bordreau said. "I'm not a wife. I'm not a mother. But I've been in this, I grew up in this community and I've lived in Bridport my entire life. So when the auxiliary started, I wanted to be able to help and fundraise. So for me, it was 'how can I support our fire department?' Because this is my community."

Bordreau said volunteering is a personal matter for her when it comes to supporting the fire department. When she was five years old, her family's home caught fire, allowing her to fully appreciate the work these firefighters do and the fundraising they rely on to get equipment. If people

support the auxiliary, she said, this is one way to help ensure the department has the resources it needs to keep the community safe.

"Our firemen wanted us to revive the ladies' auxiliary," Gordon said. "It's open to the public ... Anyone's welcome really. We do it for the community, too. There are events that we put together for the community, but they're also mostly fundraising for the fire department."

Some of these events include cookouts, a Texas Hold'em poker tournament, bingo nights and turkey bingo, a Father's Day barbecue, a Christmas-time memory tree tradition, trunk or treat for the kids and more. The businesses in the community pitch in to help their local fire department through donating prizes or other items for raffles during these events. The women themselves are some of the main donors to the fire department as well.

During a recent overnight fire in New Haven that drew multiple departments, auxiliary members packed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, snacks, crackers and water to keep the firefighters going through the night. Along with sandwiches, members often bring homemade meals and baked goods for firefighters working

long hours. Gordon's homemade macaroni and cheese and maple cookies have become favorites among the crew.

One of the auxiliary's newest projects is a community cookbook featuring recipes alongside photographs and stories from the history of both the auxiliary and the fire department. Members also recently designed their own Bridport Ladies Auxiliary t-shirts, another symbol of the organization's revival and presence in the community.

More than 60 years after it was founded, members hope the auxiliary will continue to strengthen not only the Bridport Volunteer Fire Department, but the community surrounding it. They believe they could inspire other volunteer departments to begin similar auxiliaries.

"How wonderful would it be for other small volunteer departments to have more support?" Laurie Pratt said.

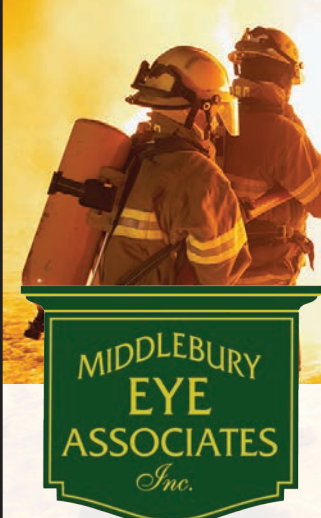
"It doesn't take a lot, you can put into it what you want," Novosel added. "It's not mandatory. You show up when you can, you go to what events you can. We all have busy lives. The commitment is what you can make of it ... But it really makes a huge difference and it gave me a sense of being involved in my community."

"Back in the day when the ladies auxiliary existed, it was more for support when the firemen were out fighting a fire — making sure they had coffee on a cold night or their bellies were full."

— Tricia Gordon



MEMBERS OF THE Bridport Ladies Auxiliary work to support their local fire department, and they also have a good time doing it. Here they stand with a poster celebrating Sherry Ouellette, a fundamental member of the auxiliary who died this spring.



Your courage is always in clear view.

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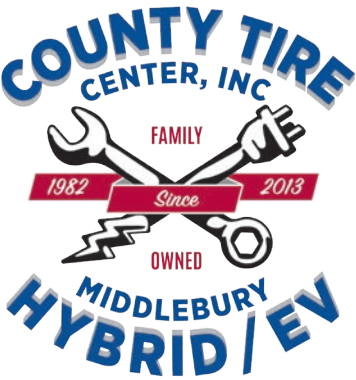
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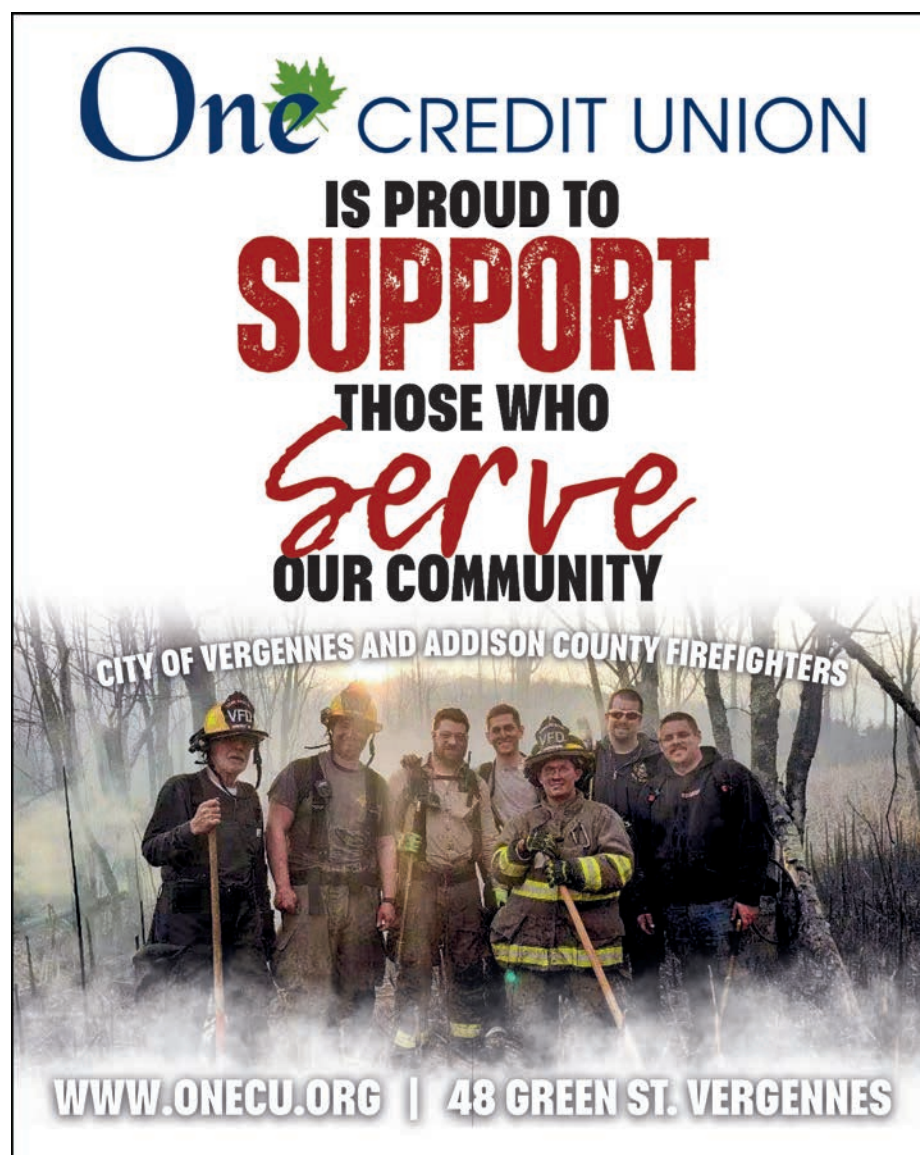
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Middlebury College students strengthen community fire department

By RACHELLE TALBERT

MIDDLEBURY — If you call the fire department in Middlebury, the ones helping you will not only be your neighbors. The Middlebury Fire Department has seven Middlebury College students on staff at all times.

One of these is 21-year-old Aidan Ulian, a rising senior and Physics major from Wellesley Hills, Mass. Like the other firefighters, he is on call 24/7 for any emergency.

Though balancing his studies with firefighting is not an easy task, Ulian said he volunteers to fight fires so he can get involved in the broader Middlebury community.

“I didn’t want to come to school and just go to Middlebury College. I wanted to come here and live here for four years,” Ulian told the *Independent*.

In his first year at the college, Ulian felt that it was easy to stay isolated on campus and not come into town. Since becoming a firefighter, though, he has built connections with the department in addition to interacting with the Middlebury community. On each call, he discovers new parts of town and meets Middlebury residents.

“This is such a great way to get to know the people in the department who have all different types of jobs in the community,” Ulian said. “And it’s a really good community here within the station.”

Ulian has built close working

relationships with gas delivery drivers, people who work at Goodro Lumber and all varieties of Middlebury residents. But Ulian’s interest in the fire department doesn’t end with connecting to the local community. It also came from a dream that began at age five.

Sixteen years ago, Ulian’s mom took him to hear Charlie Duke, an Apollo astronaut. Duke was a spacecraft communicator for the first ever moon landing, and in 1972, he was the 10th person to walk on the moon — and the youngest. When Ulian heard him speak, he wanted to be an astronaut, too.

“I was five years old — I was blown away. He was on the moon, oh my goodness. I immediately went into my astronaut phase,” Ulian said, “and then as I got a little bit older, I was like, how could I do this?”

After doing some research, Ulian found out that many astronauts start out in the Navy. At around age 12, Ulian decided that if he wanted to be an astronaut, he should work toward entering the Navy.

To Ulian, the Middlebury Fire Department is another step in that journey.

“The Navy has a big emphasis on firefighting,” Ulian said. “They’re carrying weaponry on boats, and a fire on a boat is not going to be the best thing in the world.”

Before Ulian began working for the fire

(See College Students, Page 23)



MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE SENIOR Aidan Ulian, shown dressed in full protective gear at Middlebury Fire Station No. 1, is always ready to take an emergency call. He is one of seven Middlebury students on the Middlebury Fire Department.

Independent photo/Rachelle Talbert

The Town of Panton extends its thanks and gratitude to the Vergennes Fire Department and all our area firefighters who help keep Panton safe.

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Mike Wilbur
Robert Wood

College Student

(Continued from Page 21)

department, though, he had to go through the competitive application process. The Middlebury Fire Department limits its force to seven students at a time. This ensures that the department isn't overwhelmed in the summer when the majority of college students leave.

However, this strict limit means that when one or two firefighters graduate, 20-30 students will apply for a single opening.

In his sophomore year, Ulian was accepted.

"If you get accepted, you're enrolled into the Vermont Fire Academy," Ulian explained. "It's a Fire One Certification, which is literally our national firefighting standard, and then Vermont will also teach you hazardous materials certifications."

The training program lasts nine months, an entire school year for Ulian. According to Middlebury Fire Chief David Shaw, the students accepted into the program are an essential link between the college and the community — one that not many residents know about.

"The Middlebury students are an integral part of our department. We rely on those seven students for their ability to get trained," Shaw said. "They have to go through the Firefighter One program and maintain good grades and be good students, and then we want them to be good town servants as well."

During his training, Ulian built a close bond with two firefighters that he worked with, Joe D'Avignon and Dan Ribaudo. Since completing training last year, Ulian has been thriving in the program and is now an important part of the team.

"Aidan is excelling in the program. He's setting the bar for others to reach," Chief Shaw said.

Now, Ulian is a 24/7 paid on call firefighter. At any point in the day, Ulian will receive a call from his pager alerting him to an emergency. Every time Ulian is on a call, he's paid \$15 per hour for his work.

BALANCING ACT

Though Ulian loves the job, it can

sometimes be hard to balance with his schoolwork.

"As a student, the 24/7 part can get tricky to handle, because you're in class or you're studying for an exam. And it's crunch time," Ulian said.

"The exam's tomorrow, it's 9 p.m., and I started studying just a few hours ago. And a call can go off," Ulian said. "You have to make a decision."

Last year, Ulian had an exam for a physics class — one of the hardest he had taken. The night before the exam, after he finished studying, he went to bed at 11 p.m. Just two hours later, he was woken up at 1 a.m. by his pager. A call came in for a structure fire.

Structure fires happen when fire spreads to the walls, roof or other structural components of a building. The calls can take upwards of five hours. Ulian had to make a choice: would he get enough rest for one of the largest exams of his college career, or take the call and help someone in need?

He took the call.

From 1 to 6 a.m., Ulian was on the

scene. After the call, he went home, slept for a quick hour and went to all his classes. That evening, he took the exam.

"I should have emailed my professor, 'Hey look, professor, I was up all night. Can I move the exam?'" Ulian said. "I didn't."

Ulian ended up with a 46% on the exam — not the worst score for a class average of 56%, but far lower than what he wanted. Afterwards, he emailed his professor to explain what happened and arrange a way to retake the exam.

"I learned my lesson," Ulian said.

Outside of exams, Ulian's friends have gotten used to him excusing himself from the dining hall to head to the fire station. Whenever his

pager vibrates in his pocket, he assesses the call.

"I do feel bad for my roommate, though, because I'm a deep sleeper," Ulian said.

Though during the day he keeps his pager on vibrate, Ulian turns the sound on at night so he can hear the calls. Every time he wakes up to hear what's happening, his roommate wakes up with him.

Unlike the other students in the program, Ulian rides his bike to the department, which takes just three minutes. The short ride — sometimes at 1 o'clock in the morning — is another reminder that the Middlebury community is just outside his door.

"The Middlebury students are an integral part of our department ... They have to go through the Firefighter One program and maintain good grades and be good students, and then we want them to be good town servants as well."

— Middlebury Fire Chief David Shaw



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