



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Catharine Young

Cassadaga Volunteer Firefighter Honored 46 Years After His Death

Catharine Young

October 21, 2011



ALBANY –A local fallen hero finally has received statewide recognition for his service and sacrifice.

Cassadaga Firefighter Kenneth Francis Schunk, who died in the line of duty 46 years ago, recently was lauded during a ceremony at the Fallen Firefighters Memorial Wall at the State Capital.

Chautauqua County Fire Coordinator Julius Leone Jr. spearheaded the effort to have Mr. Schunk's name added to the Memorial Wall.

Mr. Schunk, born on February 1, 1926, was a member of the Cassadaga Volunteer Fire Department from March 1955 until January 24, 1965, serving as fire chief for several years.

In the early morning of January 24, 1965, a call came in that a chimney at a local residence was on fire. Kenneth immediately jumped out of bed from a sound sleep and drove to the fire station. As he was exiting his vehicle, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

About a year and a half ago, Mr. Leone was reviewing a list of names of people from the County who have lost their lives in the line of duty. When he compared the list to names already included on the Memorial Wall in Albany, he noticed that Mr. Schunk's name was nowhere to be found.

"My first thought was to contact my son Scott in Washington D.C. who also is a fireman and happens to serve with John Schunk, Kenneth's son. When Scott informed me that the Schunk family was unaware that their father was not included on the Memorial, we immediately began the process that would get his name etched on the wall where it rightfully belonged," said Mr. Leone.

After working with the County and the Cassadaga Volunteer Fire Department to gather necessary paperwork, including compensation claim forms, an obituary found in an old newspaper and other vital information retrieved from Mr. Schunk's late wife Gladys, Mr. Leone filed an official application in February with the Fallen Firefighters Selection Committee on the Schunk family's behalf. A few weeks later, Mr. Leone and the Schunk family received a letter from the Selection Committee that Kenneth would be included in time for this year's induction ceremony.

"I am very proud and honored to have been involved in the process to see that Kenneth Schunk and the Schunk family received the recognition for giving his life in protection of his community. It was a pleasure working with the Cassadaga Fire Department to identify the necessary documents after 46 years since Schunk's death to move the process forward," said Mr. Leone.

The ceremony drew scores of firefighters and loved ones from around the state who watched as Mr. Schunk's name, along with eight others, officially were unveiled on the Memorial, joining 2,357 names that already are inscribed on the wall.

Twenty-one family members, including eight of Mr. Schunk's nine children, traveled from various parts of the country to attend the ceremony. Kenneth's daughter and son, Linda Kuzara and Stephen Schunk, both from Dunkirk, said the family appreciated the honor for their father.

"I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the State of New York, the Governor, Senator Young, Mr. Leone and the Cassadaga Volunteer Fire Department for the honor bestowed upon my late father," said Stephen Schunk.

"The New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial is a beautiful monument to the many individuals who have lost their lives while saving others. Having my father's name inscribed on the wall is a tremendous honor, and I wish to thank everyone who contributed in making this happen," Linda Kuzara.

Senator Catharine Young (R,C,I - Olean), who was in Albany to attend the memorial service, said, "We have a great Fire Coordinator in Julius Leone who understands that firefighters like Kenneth Schunk, who selflessly devoted their lives to help others in times of crisis, deserve to be honored and remembered. Kenneth was a true hero who loved his neighbors and community so much that he gave his all for them."

Mr. Schunk was a graduate of Canisius College in Buffalo, where he majored in chemical engineering. He was employed by Niagara Mohawk in Dunkirk, after transferring from Buffalo where he worked as a chemical engineer.

He was survived by his wife of 18 years, Gladys Ainslie; his mother, Molly; his brother, Charles Reiner; and nine children: Deborah, Suzanne, Linda, Pamela, Richard, Stephen, Nancy, Elyse, and John.

The Fallen Firefighters Memorial Wall, officially dedicated by Governor Pataki in 1998, is located on the Empire State Plaza. Standing in front of the Wall is a large bronze sculpture that depicts two firefighters carrying an injured colleague.

#####