



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

## From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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### **In the Line of Duty**

I'd like to share with you the story of Paul Brady, a Malverne firefighter who was killed in his firehouse in 2006. Brady, who was 42 at the time, had been working on top of one of the trucks in the firehouse when another firefighter mistakenly drove it out, not realizing he was up there. Paul was consequently crushed between a beam in the ceiling and the truck.

As heartbreaking as this is, it got worse. Paul Brady's name was prevented from being placed on the wall of the New York State Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Albany. In fact, it had been declined four times by the committee that oversees it. They felt that his death had not occurred "in the line of duty," their criteria being that it had to pertain to activities related to emergency incidents or training. This was despite others having been approved for deaths in accidents, for heart attacks and while serving in Iraq. It was also despite the accident being recognized by the state Workers' Compensation Board, the U.S. Department of Justice and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation as having indeed been in the line of duty. Nevertheless, Brady's name could not be added to the more than 2,300 that had been honored on the memorial.

The good news is that after six years of concerned advocacy by thousands of volunteer firefighters from across New York State, the legislature passed a bill that Governor Cuomo signed this week that will result in Paul Brady's name being added alongside those of his fallen brothers and sisters. The new law provides that any firefighter who dies be included on the Memorial if the death is recognized as line of duty by an "authoritative agency."

The fact that it took this long to do what so many of us knew was the right thing all along speaks volumes about people's perception and teaches us some valuable lessons. While I'll accept that there were differences of opinion about official criteria for "line of duty," I think they were largely shaped by attitudes that hold volunteer firefighters with less regard. The fact is, not everyone sees volunteers in the same light as full-time professionals and I think this situation exposed that reality and the tensions therein.

Now that it's done, let's set the record straight for anyone unfamiliar with the valor and value of our volunteers. They may not be categorized as full-time professionals but to the people they serve, especially us here on Long Island, they are every bit as respected and esteemed. They are our firefighters, our emergency personnel, our first-responders, and our

life-savers. They just happen not to get paid. Ask anyone who's been cut out of their wrecked car or carried from their burning home, and you'll understand why our volunteers are the source of so much civic pride in all of our communities.

But all this speaks to an even larger point about the kind of communities we live in. We aren't the city nor do we pretend to be and that's just fine by us. We are communities where neighbors still know and care about one another, where we keep an eye on each other's kids, and where annual block parties are "can't be missed" events. We're the towns where your bank teller is also the soccer coach, where we stop in to check on our elderly neighbors and where those same neighbors turn out for the Little League parade even though their kids have long since grown up. We are where you return when you decide to get married and settle down and where the neighbor you're barbecuing with suddenly runs out, putting his or her life in danger to save a life and put out a fire. Our volunteers, and especially our volunteer firefighters, are the heart of our suburban communities.

And that's why Paul Brady belongs on the memorial wall – because he was out there, being a good neighbor and serving his community at a firehouse when he could have been anywhere else. He represented what we believe in and the values we pass on to our children – not just us parents but whole communities. He was "in the line of duty" for sure.