

Elks honor firefighters, police on Sept. 11

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The anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001 is a time for remembering not only firefighters and emergency workers

who lost their lives on that day, but the local firefighters and police officers who protect and serve every day of the year.

Last Sunday at noon, a small

group of Elks, including their wives and daughters, prepared and served a hot meal of chicken parmesan with ziti, antipasto salad, garlic bread and

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desserts to all of the on-duty firefighters and police in Medford's stations.

The gesture is slowly catching on around the country because it puts a positive, local face on what is nationally a sad and somber annual commemoration.

"There was an article in the paper a few weeks ago about, 'How do we celebrate?' Do we dance or cry? This idea is very meaningful. It doesn't glamorize Sept. 11, but honors it in a memorial sort of way," said retired Lt. Col. Frank Sartanowicz.

A member of the Elks Lodge in Green Valley, Ariz., it was Sartanowicz who originally conceived of the idea to serve local firefighters in memory of their fallen comrades.

"My birthday happens to be on Sept. 11, and last year, I thought, what can we do?" he said. "So my wife and I decided to prepare dinner and deliver it to our local fire station and eat with the firefighters."

Sartanowicz said his intention was both to remember Sept. 11 and to honor the local firemen. But when he found out that there were five fire stations in his community, he got the Elks involved, and they served dinner to all of them.

"The community got behind it, and there were so many volunteers we couldn't even use them," said Sartanowicz.

Since last year, the former WWII fighter pilot has been challenging other Elks Lodges to do the same. In May, Sartanowicz, who is originally from Cambridge, paid a visit to his brother, Medford resident Henry Sartanowicz.

He took the opportunity to pitch his ideas to the Medford Elks Lodge, as well as lodges in Saugus and Natick.

"And they are jumping on!" he said.

"We liked the idea and decided to adopt it," said Elks member Phil Towne, adding that the Medford police and fire departments were "totally receptive" to the idea. "It hasn't been done by anybody in the area."

Sartanowicz said it is his hope that the tradition will spread all over the country. Besides Massachusetts, he has made contact with lodges in Colorado and Maryland.



STAFF PHOTO BY DAVID SOKOL

John Rineer, exalted ruler of Elks No. 915, and member Jay Umanzid prepare the pasta for members of the police and fire departments last Sunday.

"It's gonna take time," he said, adding he is proud that in Arizona, nearly 40 fire stations were served last Sunday.

Fire Chief Frank A. Giliberti Jr. said the meal was one that the personnel really enjoyed.

"I think it was a noble idea," said Giliberti, adding that the Medford Fire Department packs a lot of food in the kitchen as well. "But Sundays are kind of a busy day, and for the Elks to step up to the plate, I think it's a great gesture. They haven't forgotten us."