

Feature Profile Writing W11

Leading by example: Former Warren County fire chief still serves as a volunteer

May 28, 2021

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The Northern Virginia Daily

LINDEN — He had wanted to be a cop.

His dad was a sergeant in Tappahannock and a couple of times as a 15-year-old he got to ride around with him.

After graduating high school he applied to the Virginia State Police, where he was told he had to wait until he was 21 to have a gun.

“I said, ‘Whoa ... ain’t what I come down here for,’” recalled Richard “Dickie” Mabie, now 70 years old, in a recent interview. “So I went home and I actually saw the City of Richmond was advertising for firefighter.”

Fifty-one years later, the Linden resident is still a firefighter, serving as the chief of the volunteer fire department near his home, after spending the last 25 years as Warren County’s first paid fire chief.

“The job is a good job,” Mabie said. “Once it bites you, it gets you.”

Working his way up

Mabie began his career in Richmond, working his way up through the ranks over almost 26 years. Deciding he wanted to be a chief, or a lower ranking one, such as a battalion chief, he began to look outside the department.

First up was Nags Head, North Carolina.

“Nice station, nice equipment,” Mabie said. “Bored as all get out during the winter but really would be nice in the summer.”

It didn’t work out, and he found Warren County. Although his son had played football against Randolph Macon Academy, he admitted he had no clue where Front Royal was.

“But I got hired, that’s what counts,” Mabie said.

Mabie’s assignment was to bring the eight volunteer fire companies under the oversight of the county instead of having them operate independently. The consolidation would add financial guidance and accountability to the groups, Mabie said.

That meant dealing with the Front Royal Volunteer Fire Department, who were known as the “big guys,” under the old system, Mabie said. They got the most money, had the nicest equipment, ran the most calls and had the biggest staff, which included some career guys paid half by the town and the county, Mabie said.

“I went over there, I left out of there crying. I went home and literally cried,” Mabie said while laughing about the memory. “What the...have I done. I’ve given up almost 26 years in Richmond for this? They told me, ‘We’ll run your ass out of here. We don’t want you over here.’”

Having spent time with Hanover County, Mabie went back there for guidance, as they had gone through a similar process with their volunteer fire departments and received some push back.

As a firefighter, Mabie said, he can take some harsh words and around the first anniversary of his appointment, he went back to the Front Royal station to pay a visit.

“Happy anniversary, guys, year one’s gone,” Mabie told them. “They didn’t know what to say.”

The process of establishing the county’s first system took some buy-in from the rest of the companies, Mabie said. Six of them were onboard since it saved them putting effort into fiscal matters. Besides Front Royal, one other company was hesitant as it had financial records so old it wasn’t clear if the firehouse was \$20,000 or \$200,000 in the hole, Mabie said.

Eventually, the groups came around, and Mabie began implementing other changes such as clarifying leadership roles and taking over the application process to establish credibility with the community that good people were responding to emergencies.

Other changes included redeploying staff closer to their homes for quicker response times and having the county take over coordination of Emergency Management Service operations.

“I’m proud of the way this department is,” Mabie said. “It’s not just Dickie Mabie’s department. These volunteers save a lot of money.”

Retiring during COVID

Mabie said the end of his career in December was a low point. He was being paid for 35 hours of work a week and pulling mostly 50 hours, including visiting stations during the day and doing office work sometimes until 1 in the morning.

One reason he was forced to retire was a county ordinance that required him to retire when he reached 70 years old. The ordinance should be changed, he said, to allow people to work if they can pass a physical exam.

His health was another reason he retired. Not only had he fallen over or almost fallen over a couple of times, but he contracted COVID-19 and needed to be hospitalized. His stay in the hospital revealed he had suffered two strokes, though with no lasting damage.

Retiring during the pandemic meant no party, which would have brought former co-workers and friends together, Mabie said. The best possible recognition under the circumstances were the plaques and emails from people offering congratulations, he said. But “COVID hurt,” Mabie said.

Now with a pacemaker expected to last 10 years, Mabie said his doctor told him he’s safer than other firefighters since it’ll bring him back after a heart attack. And instead of buying a home in Florida like some of former co-workers, the firefighting bug that bit him half a century ago has him still going, wanting to give back.

“I was fire chief of this department for 25 years pleading with the public to contribute, being a volunteer, giving back to the community,” Mabie said. “If I’m not going to lead by example when I have the time, what have I really done.”

Still serving

Knowing the needs of the different companies in the county, he has been helping the Linden Volunteer Fire Department, which has about six active volunteer members, for the past few years, he said. Living

about six minutes away — or five if he pushes on the gas a little bit with nobody in front of him — he decided to help out at the station with the free time he has now.

Keeping the fire and rescue pager by his bed, turned down low so it doesn't bother his wife, he has decided to cut back on responding to as many calls. Still, his wife, who helps out administratively at the station, knows how much he loves the job and sometimes suggests he go to the station instead of sitting on the couch.

Mabie has never been into hunting but he does fish, mostly throwing the catches back. He goes to the store more than ever and recently got a boat to take out on the lake. He is captivated with the TV soap opera "The Young and the Restless" and admits that sometimes he records it in case he needs to catch up on what's happening in Genoa City.

Mabie, who said he has slimmed down since the end of last year, has always loved steaks and French fries with cheese. He's never been a smoker. He's never gotten a second job and his kids are all grown and understood the sacrifices he's had to make to be a firefighter, he said. He likes cutting the grass at his home, which is located up on Apple Mountain West, a place he wouldn't get rid of on a bet, he said.

But it remains to be seen when he will hang it up for good, he said.

"It's the camaraderie," said Mabie, explaining why he liked firefighting. "This is a family. It's a family away from home."