



For 20 years Richard Murphy has been at the helm of the Conception Bay South Fire Department. He has come to the conclusion it's time to move on. — Photo by Gavin Simms/Special to The Telegram

## PEOPLE

# Hanging up his helmet

*C.B.S. fire chief steps down after 20 years*

GAVIN SIMMS

SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

Richard Murphy has been living and breathing fire for more than 34 years.

It's finally come time to turn away from the flames.

Conception Bay South's 57-year-old fire chief plans to retire in a matter of days.

He's spent 18 months thinking it over. It's been a year and a half since he had a heart attack and the many years of smoke began to clear.

"It sort of made me wake up a little bit and say, 'This is enough. I need to spend some time for myself. I've been giving it long and hard thoughts since then,'" Murphy says.

He joined the department as a volunteer in 1975. His brother had done the same a year before him.

"He encouraged me to become involved. At the time, the town had nothing in the way of fire protection. We were totally reliant on the city of St. John's."

Murphy chaired the social committee, facilitated training programs and took any courses that were offered. Before long he was promoted to captain, then to deputy chief.

In 1990, the C.B.S. fire department changed from being a volunteer organization to one made up of paid workers and volunteers. They needed a fire chief, and Murphy was up for the job.

One of his first tasks was to hire six full-time firefighters. There were seven in all.

Today there's 20 and they're in the process of hiring more so they can offer 24/7 coverage to the growing

town.

A firefighter never forgets his first fire. "It was a house fire in Upper Gullies," Murphy said.

"I was a junior member and we just happened to be here at the station this particular night. I jumped into the driver's seat after my captain — who was Burt Martin at the time — said, 'You take the truck.' It was nerve-wracking, to say the least. I was only a young man and I remember going up the road and my foot was on the gas pedal and I was that nervous it was shaking."

Murphy says the protective gear they had back then doesn't compare to what they have today.

"All we had were canvas coats, plastic hats, rubber gloves and long rubbers. We were pretty wide open to the elements. The lobes of my ears would start to get hot and start to sting and burn. If you were lucky enough to have the hose you'd just turn it around and wet yourself to cool off."

Murphy will never shake the image of his first experience with a fatality in the 1970s.

"We found the baby's father hung on the stairwell banister. He tried to get upstairs to get his baby and died right there. When we went upstairs, we found the baby in the crib. I remember when we took the baby out of the crib, the imprint of her body was left in the blankets because they were full of soot and where she lay was clean. It was terrible."

He's heard people say, "You get used to it," but he says no one gets used to that.

"I don't care if you do it every day. It affects you," he says.

Murphy faced personal challenges in the past 20 years, but says they only made his commitment to the job stronger.

In 1997, the eldest of his two sons was killed by a drunk driver. In 2005 his spouse of 13 years died of cancer. He lost his brother in 2008.

"It was like it was one thing after the other," he says, shaking his head.

He said firefighting has helped him come to grips with the fact that life is unpredictable and he holds onto the feeling he gets when a tragedy is averted — whether it's a house fire extinguished in the nick of time or a cat rescued from a telephone pole.

"I remember last New Year's Eve we had a house fire here in Kelligrews and there was a fair amount of damage done, but the lady that owned the house was so grateful. She couldn't say enough. She couldn't believe the dedication — 10:30 on New Year's Eve and there were 15 or 20 volunteer firefighters on site.

"That's what makes it all worthwhile. It's so rewarding when someone just says thanks."

Murphy plans to take the rest of winter off, but he won't be sitting still. "I do a lot of carpentry work. It's nothing for me to knock down a wall or put up a wall. I enjoy work around the house. I have a motorcycle and last year we bought a new travel-trailer.."

He also has a dog to walk.

There'll be nights when he'll hear the sirens and wonder what's going down, but he'll learn to live with it. "I've been at it for 34 years," he says. "You know I'm going to miss it."