GLOUCESTER, NJ FIRE

10 YEARS LATER

SPEECH FOR MATTHEW FRANKOWSKI

Hello ladies and gentlemen. (**Introduce yourself if you haven’t already been introduced)**. I am Captain Matt Frankowski and I work for the Mount Ephraim Fire Department. Thank you all for being here today to share this commemorative gathering with all of us, as we continue to pay tribute to our fallen fighters. The consistent outpouring of sympathy and concern from our neighbors and people from all over the country has been a tremendous comfort and source of support throughout the past 10 years. (**If there is anyone else you would like to acknowledge, do so here)**. I would like to extend a special thank you to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle said, “The beauty of the soul shines out when a man bears with composure one heavy mischance after another, not because he does not feel them, but because he is a man of **high** **and heroic temper**.” Some of us had the privilege to know, love, work with and be saved by 3 of our own, each of whom possessed infinite amounts high and heroic temper.

Fire gives life and takes life; it’s used to transform and to terminate, to feed and to obliterate. It is a symbol of life and of death. It inspires as much as it incites. Today we look back at the devastation caused by the Gloucester City fire of July 4, 2002. As a community, we honor the memory of those we lost, we’ll remember how we’ve mourned and memorialized, and we’ll plan what we’ll continue to do to honor the legacy of the 6 lives lost in that unimaginable tragedy 10 years ago.

Three little girls, innocent and full of promise lost their lives on July 4th, 2002. Alexandra Slack would have been 15 years old had she lived, and her twin sisters Colletta and Claudia would have been 13. They never had the opportunity to grow up, play with friends, hang out at the mall, learn lessons at school, or live the lives they were promised at birth. Actually, this is one of the most important lessons all of us can learn from tragedy. Life is precious. Honor it. No one knows what the next moment might bring. Those 3 little girls went to sleep and naturally expected to wake up the next day and celebrate Independence Day. They didn’t. Instead, they were trapped in fire so intense, their house collapsed around them. Let us pray they didn’t know what hit them. On that night, as soon as the alarms came in, the valiant firefighters in all neighboring communities did what they were born and trained to do. Sixteen men of “high and heroic temper” entered the structure determined to face the fire head on to find and rescue those children, but only thirteen came out of that devastation. Eight firefighters were trapped. Five were rescued. The early morning light of July 4, 2002 revealed that three of our own, Gloucester City firefighter Thomas Stewart III, Mt. Ephraim Chief James Sylvester, and Deputy Chief / Assistant Camden County Fire Marshal John West lost their lives before rescue crews were able to locate and save them.

Today we honor and remember our fallen comrades, for their selflessness, bravery and valor. Some may think that the brave do not know fear. That is not so. Firefighters are aware of the danger they face, but they are not stopped by it. They sign on to do a job that may very well kill them, but what distinguishes the firefighter is that somewhere, somehow, their souls are so strong and their innate bravery so intense, that the fear is subdued; devotion to their communities and the dedication to their purpose overcomes that innate fear.

Courage is not the sole provenance of the firefighter, however. These incredible men were also surrounded by bravery that inspired them; in the faces of their comrades, and in the hearts and souls of their families-their mothers, fathers, siblings, spouses and children. Someone once said, “The bravest battle that was ever fought; shall I tell you where and when? On the maps of the world you will find it not; it was fought by the mothers of men.” Every firefighter knows that, as the saying goes, “They are part of all that they have met.” Every firefighter fights to preserve life and they fuel the passion to protect thanks to the loving relationships they have with their family and friends. Each one of our fallen heroes leaves behind a bittersweet legacy.

* Gloucester City Firefighter Thomas Stewart III proposed to his girlfriend of 5 years, Danielle Ruggierio that night. Thomas knew there was “one person in the world for him,” and that was Danielle. Thomas Stewart was on the brink of a wonderful married life with Danielle and their baby son Nicholas. Today Nicholas is 11 and is a fine young boy who can be proud of his father’s bravery and dedication to the well-being and safety of others. Firefighter Thomas Stewart died way before his time, but he inherently knew that each day might be his last. He died making sure Danielle and Nicholas knew how much he loved them, no matter what.
* Mt. Ephraim Chief James Sylvester was just 31 years old on July 4, 2002. He and his wife, Marilyn were expecting their first child at the time of the tragic fire. Jim knew what he wanted to do with his life at an early age. At just 14 years old, he joined the Mt. Ephraim Fire Department’s junior program. He was a respected colleague and employee, devoted husband to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, father and beloved son, brother and friend.
* Deputy Chief / Assistant Camden County Fire Marshal John West’s duties were that of Fire Marshal that fateful night, but he knew life was at stake inside that burning building and risked his own safety as he went into the inferno to save others. Fire Marshal West’s bravery will never be forgotten. He devoted his life and career to spreading the word about fire safety and prevention and became a legend as he and his beloved arson investigating canine partner, Raider, paid endless visits to various businesses, schools and events teaching people how to save their own lives. Fire Marshal West‘s family, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, are infinitely proud of his accomplishments and cherish his legacy.

The devastation and loss we all suffered on that hot July night are literally burned into the history of our community. How do we heal? Where do we find the strength to go on? We heal by remembering. We heal by honoring those we lost. We heal by following their noble examples of lives valiantly lived in the service of others. We heal by being inspired by their dedication to others and by pledging to live our lives with purpose. In the past ten years, we’ve built monuments and organized charitable events in memory of these fallen heroes. We speak of their legacy and we try to make our homes and schools and offices safer in their honor, but every year, July 4th approaches and the wounds open again and we remember the horrid loss. It has now been 10 years. We will never forget the memories we cherish of the people lost in that awful fire, but as I said earlier, fire is also a symbol of life. We refer to the soul as a flame and many eternal flames have been ignited as a means to represent lost souls. 10 years have passed. Think of the light that is kindled inside of each one of you as you picture the smiles of these 3 men. Think of the last thing Thomas told you, the last joke Jim cracked, the last feat John performed with Raider and be inspired. Think of how brightly each one of them shone to those around them. Think of how each one lived and loved and laughed. Think of the lessons you learned from them. Think of the beacon of safety and security they symbolized, and think of how **YOU** can take that light and inspire and protect others-your family, your friends, your colleagues, your community. These men live on in the light that burns within of each one of us. When you think of these heroes, remember the wisdom of Buddha, who said, “Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle,  and the life of the candle will not be shortened.  Happiness never decreases by being shared.” Let’s go forward and consider these brave men as infinite light we will use to guide our lives and the well being of our communities. Think of those lights as the spirit that drives and inspires you to live your lives with consideration, respect and reverence for their memories and legacies. To the families and friends of these fallen heroes, please know that we will never forget the courage and contribution each one made to preserve and protect our community. We are grateful for their selfless actions and we will forever appreciate their sacrifice and dedication.

Thank you all.