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## A Burning Desire To Put Out Fires

Cheshire lawyer switches to 'firefighter mode' at a moment's notice

By **DOUGLAS S. MALAN**

Attorney Jay N. Hershman was making a point about how he has to work his personal schedule around his position as a volunteer firefighter in Cheshire when his scanner suddenly squawked loudly in the background.

"You're not going to believe this," he said, "but there's a fire call inside my office building."

With that, Hershman ended the conversation and rushed into "firefighter mode." And though the call turned out to be a false alarm (smoke from a soldering project in the basement activated the alarm), it illustrated a firefighter's need to switch gears at a moment's notice.

"You're basically going from zero to one hundred in a matter of seconds," said Hershman, a name partner of Baillie, Hall & Hershman in Cheshire. "As soon as the alarm sounds, your anxiety level takes off. At some point, it becomes second nature."

Hershman, 31, joined the town's junior firefighting program when he was 16 and earned his full certification two years later.

It's a job for which he seems naturally hardwired. He can trace his interest to his earliest memories of visiting Pittsburgh, where his grandmother lived across the street from a firehouse, which became his favorite haunt. His mother told him that his first word was "truck," and his older sister, Elisabeth, remembers her infant brother crawling to the window whenever a siren screamed out.

Hershman has risen through the ranks, starting as a junior level firefighter who handled menial tasks for more senior squad members. He's now an assistant chief who heads the training operations.

He has been recognized with numerous awards from the fire department and civic

As assistant fire chief in Cheshire, attorney Jay N. Hershman assesses a burning building's stability and coordinates rescue missions.



Mia Malafrente

organizations in town, and he has become the point man orchestrating the action at the scene of a fire. "My preference is to be on the hose line inside with the fire," he said, a position often held by younger firefighters after they turn 18.

Among his many immediate responsibilities as assistant chief are to assess the burning building's stability, coordinate rescue missions and determine if the fire can spread to other buildings.

These crisis-management skills became extremely valuable, Hershman said, when he entered law school and then launched his legal practice, which focuses on real estate, estate planning and corporate and business organization.

An average of 50 volunteers respond to a fire call, Hershman said, and form several small teams that include a water pump operator, a search and rescue crew, a crew working on the roof and a crew working inside the building.

"As a volunteer, the fun part is you can be

in any one of those positions," he noted. "You have to know how to do everything."

But some things aren't fun. After all, every call has the potential to be life-threatening and definitive. Hershman's first such encounter came as a junior firefighter responding to a double fatal car accident one Christmas night. "To experience that at 16 or 17 years old, it has quite an impact," he said. "It absolutely puts things in perspective."

Cheshire's volunteer firefighters work an average of 22 hours a week.

In addition to responding to calls, they gather weekly at the fire station to check gear, eat dinner and watch movies. The mix includes an insurance executive, a garbage truck driver, a carpenter and a college student, all of whom share an immediate bond.

"You wouldn't think that a 50-year-old truck driver would interact with a college student, but here they're eating dinner together," Hershman said. "It's basically one big family." ■