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WHERE THE COMMUNITY MEETS

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THE UNDERAPPRECIATED SERVICE

This has been a tough week, starting with the tragic death of 18-year-old Ryan Laarman at Elgin Feeds, to a major fire the same day across Beech Street at the Elgin Innovation Centre and, Monday night, a fire that gutted the south side of Talbot Street downtown.

The loss of a loved one, particularly so young, will never be replaced, the treasured memories to be enshrined and honoured.

What this week of tragedy and loss has highlighted is the excellent emergency services – the police, paramedics, neighbouring professional fire departments and especially our VOLUNTEER firefighters – who handle these trying situations with calm professionalism, skill and diligence.

We are always quick to highlight the work of our volunteer firefighters because their work is a labour of love. They are paid, but a pittance, yet they sacrifice family, business, personal time and social life in the service of their community in sometimes dangerous, even life-threatening situations.

Once I knew many of our volunteers, but that generation has largely moved on. Their duties and demands have changed, with much more training necessary and many more calls. The once key role

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Is end coming, for public speaking?

by Rob Perry
of The Aylmer Express

Aylmer Deputy Mayor Pete Barbour, at a meeting Wednesday, March 15, reported that public speaking competitions organized for schoolchildren by Royal Canadian Legion branches are dying out.

He noted that Colonel Talbot Branch 81, Royal Canadian Legion, in Aylmer recently hosted such a contest for children from Grades 1 through 12.

Aylmer's was the last Legion in the district sponsoring such a competition, he said. He encouraged parents, even if their children's schools weren't participating directly next year, to consider signing up youngsters.

Learning to speak in public was important for a child's growth and future well-being, and the contests were "just a great way for kids to learn," he said.

Councillor Arthur Oslach said he believed the Aylmer Legion planned to hold one more public speaking contest, next year, to see how it went.

Of the eight Legion Branches in the London zone, he noted, Aylmer's was the only one continuing to do so.

In an interview after the meeting, Cr. Oslach said this year's contest involved only two entries, and both were from outside the area, with one from Delhi and the other from Port Rowan.

Ten years ago, he said, the contest would have attracted 36 children.

While public speaking was drawing little interest, he added, the Legion's annual Remembrance Day poster and poetry competition was still going strong, with 50 or 60 entries a year.



Firefighters from Aylmer, Malahide, Central Elgin and St. Thomas battled a major fire that started at 50 Talbot St. E. in Aylmer on Monday night, March 20, beginning at 8:17 p.m. The blaze destroyed two buildings, while damage to adjoining ones is to be assessed by a structural engineer. More photos are on pages 2 and 3. (AE/Rob Perry)

Fire devastates downtown

by Rob Perry
of The Aylmer Express

Two buildings were destroyed and neighbouring buildings damaged during a fire that started at 50 Talbot Street East, between King and John streets, on Monday night, March 21, 2023, at 8:17 p.m.

Everyone residing in those and nearby buildings were safely evacuated, and no firefighters were reportedly injured.

The cause of the fire is being attributed to a cooking mishap. Aylmer firefighters were

joined by their colleagues from Malahide Fire, Central Elgin Fire Rescue and St. Thomas Fire to battle the stubborn blaze on the south side of Talbot St. downtown.

At one point, all three aerial trucks from Aylmer, Central Elgin and St. Thomas had joined in the fight, pouring thousands of litres of water per minute down into the fire and through front windows of the burning buildings.

Firefighters continued their work through the night. Early Tuesday morning, heavy ma-

chinery was brought in to demolish the building which had housed two realty offices on Talbot Street and an accounting office at the back, plus apartments above.

Sidewalks on both sides of Talbot Street between King and John were still cordoned off Tuesday morning about 10 a.m.

Mayor Jack Couckuyt said a resident of an upstairs apartment at 50 Talbot St. E. called 911 at 8:17 to report a cooking fire.

The town was estimating the value of property lost to the fire at \$800,000, he continued.

He said he was impressed by how quickly emergency responders, including Aylmer, Malahide, Central Elgin, and St. Thomas, turned out to battle the blaze, and by how well they worked together.

This was the third major emergency town firefighters

had responded to in less than a week, he said, and they were already exhausted.

Citizens pitched in, turning up with coffee and doughnuts for firefighters as they worked through the night.

Mayor Couckuyt said when he arrived at the fire, he felt like "1965 all over again," when a major fire downtown destroyed several buildings.

He'd been only four blocks away, he recalled, when he saw that historic fire start up after a collision involving a propane truck.

This time, the town was working with other agencies to aid an estimated 20 residents displaced because of the fire damage.

East Elgin Community Complex had been opened as a rescue shelter Monday night, but turned out not to be needed,

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Left picture, Austin Bubba-Clarke of host Aylmer Minor Hockey's Under 9MD team turned with the puck, pursued by a Belle River player, during a game at East Elgin Community Complex on Saturday, March 18. Right picture, teammate Everett

Peacock chipped the puck toward the Belle River end of the rink. Aylmer took the win, 2-1, on goals scored by Camden Underhill and Carter Cosyns. (AE/Rob Perry)

Ryan Laarman, 18, dies in Elgin Feeds workplace fall

Ryan Laarman, 18, of Belmont died after falling into a concrete shaft near a grain elevator at Elgin Feeds on John Street North in Aylmer, on Wednesday, March 15, at 10:45 a.m. He's been a part-time employee for three years.

Police Chief Zvonko Horvat said Mr. Laarman had lost his footing and fallen into the underground shaft, sustaining life-threatening injuries.

He was taken by ambulance to St. Thomas Elgin General Hospital, where he died.

Federal labour officials had been notified and would be investigating the death, Chief

Horvat noted.

Later that same day, Elgin Feeds, on a social media post, stated it was "grieved to announce today the tragic death of a beloved employee and family member. Ryan Laarman, aged 18, died today in a mill accident.

"Ryan has been a part-time employee for three years. He attended Grade 12 at St. Thomas Community Christian School.

"Our hearts are deeply saddened for his parents, grandparents, brother and sisters, along with his many friends, co-workers and extended family members.

"Ryan was a bright light

with a beaming personality who did his job with passion and enthusiasm. We pray for God's comfort at this painful time."

Mr. Laarman was the son of Gene and Caroline (Jongjean) Laarman, and is also survived by his brother Samuel and his wife Ruth and sisters Reese and Hannah.

He was born in Belleville on Jan. 23, 2005, and was a Grade 12 student at St. Thomas Community Christian School.

"He loved music, art, basketball, hunting and spending time with his friends," his obituary read.

His family asked for dona-



Ryan Laarman (AE/contributed)

tions to St. Thomas Community Christian School. "This is a school where he grew up, and he was known and loved."