

Wednesday, October 6, 2004

Foster's Daily Democrat Editorial

## **A time to celebrate the life of someone with a purpose**

### **The short life of Danny Holmes serves as a guidepost for us all**

The dangers faced by the men and women in the front lines of public safety was brought home again Saturday with the loss of one of the Seacoast's own a continent away.

Daniel Holmes spent most of his life in Rochester, graduating from Spaulding High School. Saturday that life was lost.

Danny Holmes lost his life fighting a fire at Kings Canyon National Park in northern California, struck by the burning top of a dead 100-foot tree that fell while firefighters were conducting a controlled burn. He died while being transported to a helicopter landing zone in the park.

Danny Holmes was doing the work he loved — work that allowed him to contribute to the preservation of the environment. First a ranger with the National Park Service, he was part of an elite group of firefighters trained to go anywhere in the country to combat forest fires. He was only 26 years old when he died Saturday, but he set out and achieved an ideal, a challenge too few of us are willing to confront as we go through life. He was an "adventurer," his mother, Delina "Dee" Burke said of him.

Thursday, Danny Holmes will be mourned in Rochester. Firefighters from across the country will come to the Lilac City to honor one of their own — one of a special breed of people who put themselves on the line every day in defense of lives, property and our environment.

There are people who walk among us who go unnoticed as they perform their routine duties each day — invisible heroes we take for granted as members of our communities. We only see them when we, our properties or our surroundings are placed at risk. But they are always there for us —trained and prepared to come to our aid.

A loss of life is almost always a tragedy for someone — loved ones, friends, neighbors. The loss of someone like Danny Holmes is something that makes each of us poorer. The people who knew him are especially poor for the loss.

Danny Holmes was part of a special kinship — a kinship of men and women who have answered a call within themselves; a kinship few can understand because few are members of this unique class.

Danny Holmes had a passion for the environment — an enthusiasm for all that is natural. The woods he hiked and the mountains he climbed were his world. His ardor for the environment led him to something more than a vocation; it led him to a purpose in life. He earned his degree in environmental services at Johnson State College in Johnson, Vt. in 2002.

"Danny loved the environment and keeping our environment safe and beautiful," his mother said. It was a love of the environment that led him to become involved in outdoor safety, and eventually to becoming a ranger, she said.

Danny Holmes has come home. Thursday, he will be mourned by his family, friends and other loved ones — by neighbors and comrades from near and far. But as the mourning takes place, let's also think in terms of Danny's life — a life with purpose; a life worthy of being celebrated; a life from which each of us can learn something.

Friday, October 8, 2004

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## Hundreds attend funeral of Rochester native who died fighting Calif. fire

By JASON HOWE

Democrat Staff Writer

ROCHESTER — Danny's smile was like the sun.

His spirit of adventure and love of the outdoors were the "thread that sewed" his friends and family together.

It was appropriate, they said, that the sun shone brightly at his funeral procession Thursday morning, in which roughly 150 uniformed firefighters marched through downtown in his memory.

Daniel "Danny" Holmes, 26, was killed Saturday after being struck by the burning top of a 100-foot white fir tree that unexpectedly fell as his team conducted a controlled burn in Kings Canyon National Park in California.

Danny, as his mother, Dee Burke, and his family called him, was part of the Arrowhead Hotshots, a National Park Service elite forestry firefighting squad based at the park.

Nearly 20 of those who saw the accident and tried to save his life were present to bear his casket down Main Street to the mournful strains of the International Brotherhood of Firefighters Pipe and Drum Corps.

In tears, Danny's parents, brother, girlfriend, aunts and uncles followed his casket, but the separation of groups during the procession was not indicative of the common bond shared by everyone present.

His family clearly went beyond the bounds of blood relations to include his team, friends from home and fellow firefighters from across the nation.

"He's just Danny ... people would meet him and walk away saying, 'that's the nicest guy I've ever met,' and that's just Danny," cousin Andy Sanville said.

"I close my eyes and I see his smile— the smile and the laugh is the spirit of Danny, but he was even bigger than that. He lived his life in a way we all wished we could," Sanville eulogized.

His brother Matt, who flew up from Tampa, Fla., said Danny was a unifying force for his immediate and extended family.

"Danny's love and energy was the thread that sewed everyone together. I know he thought of all of you (pointing to firefighters) as brothers," Matt assured them, speaking from the front of the United Methodist Church in Rochester.

Those who worked with Danny, both as a park ranger and an Arrowhead Hotshot had nothing but thanks for the energy and commitment he showed on the job.

Above all else was his infectious love of the outdoors, something everyone "blamed" on his mother.

"Danny was always energized ... he was someone that genuinely loved the outdoors. I've never been around someone like that before him," said Climbing Ranger Dan Leonard of the Denali National Park in Alaska.

The two were close friends who trained and were certified together in Washington state.

Also present was Danny's girlfriend, Jules, who flew out with the Hotshots for the funeral. The last picture taken of Danny was for her, but it showed the smile that blessed everyone who saw it.

"They (the Hotshots) all pitched in to get me a ticket out here. I don't know what to say ... I've never been loved so completely by anyone, and he's gone ... this was my picture, he took it for me," Jules whispered, holding up the funeral bulletin with a picture of Danny in active duty gear on the front.

It was Danny's death while on active duty that drew firefighters from across the Seacoast, state and country.

The procession of more than 150 firefighters, forestry rangers, National Park units, firetrucks and rescue workers began at Edgerly Funeral home just after 10 a.m.

Color guard from the National Park Service led the way, as members of the New Hampshire firefighter's color guard followed to the sound of bagpipes.

Danny's flag-draped coffin was borne by members of the Hotshots, who marched alongside Rochester's funeral-draped Engine 2. His casket rested atop the engine.

The parade presented his casket to the front of the church to the strains of funeral music, marking Danny's all-to-quick return to the earth he loved.

Sun shimmered along rows of medals and full dress gear, while the tracks of tears stood prominent on many somber faces.

"We're just glad it's so beautiful. We know it's Danny smiling down on us from this last great adventure he's on now," Sanville said.

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## Brotherhood treats members like family

By JASON HOWE

Democrat Staff Writer

ROCHESTER — Firefighters define themselves as a brotherhood.

The word encompasses all facets of a bond forged through common experiences and hardships in one of the nation's most hazardous professions.

This mutual understanding makes a member treat fellow workers like family — like a brother— and is what drew firefighters from across the state and country to pay their last respects Thursday to firefighter Daniel Holmes, who died Sunday when a burning 100-foot-tall pine tree fell on him while combating a fire.

The 26-year-old grew up in Rochester and graduated from Spaulding High School, before heading off to Johnson State University in Johnson, Vt., and eventually becoming a wildfire firefighter in Northern California.

He died in the line of duty, a symbol area fire chiefs cite as the highest level of sacrifice a firefighter can make.

"This is something we always say is a brotherhood. If a firefighter dies in another community, it's like losing a brother. You understand because of the dangers of the job, because we serve and protect at the cost of our own lives. But everything is a team approach, there's never an individual focus," Rochester Chief Mark Dellner said Thursday.

When one of their own dies, whether in the local department or across the country, the loss is treated like that of a blood brother.

"I've been in this business for 28 years, and this aspect hasn't changed since I came in, it's team thing that's about helping each other, and this goes from funerals to putting a roof on your house," Dellner said.

Beyond just helping, there is an understanding that a firefighter's life can be taken at any time.

The bond of brotherhood plays out in the tradition of a funeral procession, with full dress and aplomb. The march shows respect for the fallen brother, but also celebrates the survival of those "brothers" still alive.

"I look at the procession as 'there, but the grace of God go I,' it could have been me. I think we look at that as it could just as well have been me. It could be the next time I go out that it's me, or one of my brothers that is the next to go," Laconia Deputy Chief Deborah Pendergast said.

The tradition is all too familiar for Pendergast, who recently participated in a similar procession ceremony for Laconia firefighter Mark Miller, who died in the line of duty on March 11.

Miller was killed during cold water dive training, possibly because of faulty equipment.

Regardless of the cause, it is an understanding of the officers sacrifice that draws firefighters from across the four corners of the country to pay their respects.

"The point here is that it doesn't matter necessarily where you're from, but you're always going to have the support of the fire service. It's just a bond we have," Dellner said.

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