

Deputy fire chief has spent two decades with department

By Sam Bari

Deputy Fire Chief Ken Gladding has been with the department for more than two decades. "I love being a fireman. Once it gets in your blood, you can't quit," Gladding said.

Gladding, 42, is a Jamestown native and has only lived outside Jamestown for six years. "I guess I had to go to Florida to meet my wife, Fran. She was working at the First Union Bank in Jacksonville. We were introduced on a blind date," he explained about his years away from the island. The Gladdings have now been married for more than 20 years and have two children.

"My friend Brian Bryer got me interested in the fire department when I was 16," Gladding said. "Joe Tiexiera was chief at the time." Gladding was active in the department until he graduated from high school, then he decided to go to Florida to visit friends and ended up staying. He learned auto mechanics by working on cars when he was younger and convinced the Jaguar dealership to hire him. "Yeah, I was a Jaguar mechanic for almost six years," he said.

During his stay in Florida, he married Fran and they had two children before moving back to Jamestown in 1992. They visited the island while they were living in Florida, and made plans to move back as soon as they could. When they returned, he was 23 years old, and he rejoined the fire department. He also went to work in the family excavating business, which he does to this day.



Deputy Chief Ken Gladding participated in an all-company Thursday night drill with the Jamestown Fire Department.

Photo by Andrea von Hohenleiten

Gladding moved up through the ranks starting as a firefighter. When he was promoted to lieutenant, he was put in charge of Engine 3. When he made captain, his duties included taking charge of the fire department boat, Marine 1, in addition to commanding Engine 3.

"I've always enjoyed the boat," Gladding said. "We've saved a lot of people from drowning with that craft. Unfortunately, I've had to work with the dive team to also make some recoveries along the way. I feel good though when I see someone walking around that we plucked out of the water," he said.

"Especially when we've rescued bridge jumpers and brought them back to lead productive lives."

Gladding said that the responsibilities of a chief are less hands-on than when he was operating the boat or driving Engine 3. He said that chiefs oversee the entire crew whenever an incident occurs. Although he didn't say it directly, he alluded to missing the days when he was more involved with the actual work of putting out fires and pulling people from the water.

The Jamestown Fire Department has a good record, Gladding said. In more than 20 years, they

have only had one fatality where a woman died in a fire before the firefighters could get to her.

"I'm proud to say that I was involved in a few incidents where I worked with EMTs to save lives. One was my uncle. We had to perform CPR on him before we could get him to a hospital, and that saved his life. Saving lives is always a team effort. It's rarely an individual effort."

Gladding has seen many changes since he joined the department. "Back then we only had 30 to 35 people," he said. "Now I believe we have 82. And we have quite a

few young volunteers that show promise. It's good to know that these people will be experienced and will be around to carry on the traditions and duties of a proud and accomplished department after the veterans are gone."

He said that the equipment has vastly improved since he began his career. The thermal imaging cameras that allow firefighters to see through smoke with zero visibility were just recently developed. "We can find fire in walls, as well as electrical shorts," Gladding said.

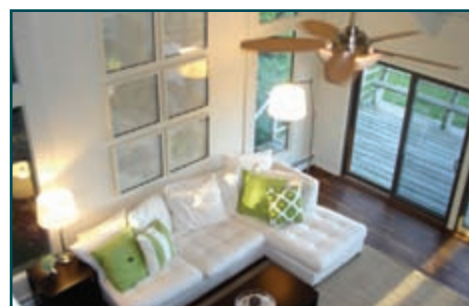
Gladding's son, Matt, 18 is a firefighter on Engine 1. His daughter, Libby, 19, was with the department until she started at URI majoring in environmental science. Matt was recently accepted to Johnson and Wales University where he will major in international business.

When he isn't working with the fire department or the family business, Gladding enjoys his family, boating, and playing golf with his fire department friends.

"Every year the department holds a golf tournament to raise funds for the department and Save the Bay. We also use the money for a scholarship fund for our younger members," Gladding said.

Gladding also gives tours of the fire station and encourages kids who want to join the department. "Every October we hold fire safety week for kids," he said. "We go to the schools and talk to the students about fire safety. I think that works, otherwise the town would have more incidents and possibly more fatalities."

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