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MEDIA RELEASE

WALLINGTON CFA VETERAN EARNS VFBV LIFE MEMBERSHIP

Wallington CFA veteran Gerry Neyenuis has added another life membership to his growing list of honours, and he admits receiving this one brought a tear to his eye.

Gerry was recently made a Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) life member, to match his CFA, District 7 championship committee and brigade honours.

The presentation of his VFBV plaque during the state championships in Bendigo was an emotional moment.

“That was more meaningful than anything else,” he said. “It was in front of a crowd I’ve been looking after for 10 years as chairman of the championship committee so that was a real buzz. It was hard to hold back a tear.”

Gerry, who turns 72 in August, joined the CFA in 1966, initially with Gruyere near Coldstream, then Hampton Park and in 1976 he moved to Ocean Grove and joined the Wallington brigade on the Bellarine Peninsula.

“When I started, I lived out in the country and in those days most people in the country got involved with the fire brigade,” he said.

“It was just a form of helping out your neighbours.”

There have been significant changes over the intervening decades. “The commitment wasn’t as big in the early days; there’s a lot more involved with being a firefighter today and it’s a much safer service. Our minimum skills are all about safety.”

Gerry has had various lieutenant roles and was captain of the Wallington brigade for 12 years, deputy group officer, Board member of VFBV and state councillor representing volunteers across his district, six years as deputy delegate to the central council of the former Rural Association and chairman of the state championship committee.

Gerry’s wife Maria was communications officer for 12 years while he was captain, his sons - twins Greg and Michael, 49, have been members since they were youngsters and Greg’s three children Bianca, 21, and twins Eliza and Caleb, 17, are also involved.

“The tremendous thing about volunteering is that it can be so family orientated,” he said.

“At one stage my daughter Michelle was in a brigade and we had four of us in one running team in the championships. That sort of thing makes it all worthwhile.”

He’s also made lifetime friends across the state but “the fact you’re helping people that need your help” is what keeps him going.

Ash Wednesday in 1983 was his biggest involvement but he’s joined volunteer strike teams to NSW and South Australia and across Victoria to fight major fires, but now he’s unsure about the future of the CFA.

“It won’t look the same in the future,” he said. “I still make myself available for strike teams. That’s one of the important reasons for having CFA volunteers. It’s good to have paid firefighters but if we lose volunteers that would diminish our surge capacity for the strike teams.

“We had fires around Geelong and Ballarat a few weeks ago that needed 35 trucks in a matter of minutes. Without the volunteers, where would you get those numbers?”

Gerry added that he was proud of his roles with the VFBV and that it continued to provide a strong voice for volunteer firefighters.

VFBV CEO Adam Barnett said volunteers like Gerry are the cornerstone of local communities and their experience and willingness to drop everything to provide vital surge capacity to communities in need makes a huge contribution to the safety and response capacity of CFA and the protection of Victoria.

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