

Lake Valley fire chief hanging up turnouts for good

By Kathryn Reed

Jeff Michael is leaving home.

The Lake Valley fire chief is retiring after 32 years with the department. It's a place he calls home. A place where the 59-year-old says he grew up and grew old.

He will be leaving June 24 – the fourth anniversary of the devastating Angora Fire. But that's not why he picked that date. It just happens to be the end of a pay period.



Jeff Michael

Still, it was that fire of 2007 that Michael gets choked up about.

“To this day I still have nightmares about it,” Michael said. “That was my fire. That was my back yard. The heroic and valiant efforts of all the firefighting agencies was incredible. We saved a lot of homes, but we lost a lot of homes.”

Some of those 254 homes belonged to people who call him boss.

While the fire was fought by many jurisdictions, what wasn't on U.S. Forest Service property, was within the boundaries of Lake Valley Fire Protection District in El Dorado County.

Michael's voice changes tone as he talks about the complacency that has set in over time. He points fingers at individual homeowners and agencies operating in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

"I still hear people not wanting to do defensible space. If we had all the homes treated with defensible space, we would have probably saved who knows how many homes," Michael said.

He's frustrated he'll be leaving before the Forest Service begins the 10,000-acre South Shore Fuels Reduction Project.

"People are not allowing the South Shore Plan to go through. Some environmentalists think it should not go through. And the treatment of the burn area. Let's get that dead wood out," Michael says with conviction. (A lawsuit has been filed against the Forest Service to prevent the removal of the dead standing trees in the burn area.) "From a firefighting standpoint you need to get that out of there. It's how you protect the homes there."

The job has its good and bad moments – like all careers.

"You live for the moment, but you remember the good you do," Michael said. "I've seen some of the faces of kids where their dad or mom was hurt at a car accident. You take them in your arms and you feel their pain. You can't help but feel the pain and suffering you see."

Defining the chief

Michael, who became chief in September 2005, is not just a crusader for his district, but an advocate of fire prevention throughout the basin.

"His leadership post-Angora would be the defining moment in Jeff's career as fire chief," said Guy LeFever, fire chief with Tahoe-Douglas Fire Protection District. "Replacing him will be very difficult. I hope they have someone locally who understands the political environment that Lake Valley resides

in. The Angora Fire was an eye-opener. A tremendous amount of action has taken place since then. He was on the edge of that change.”

Being the top guy has not meant staying in an office all day.

“He leads by example. These guys would follow him anywhere,” Leona Allen, spokeswoman for the department, said. “One of the things I like about him is he is a chief that doesn’t wear a white shirt all the time. He will drive an ambulance. He will drive a truck. He will come in on his day off.”

Andy Kauffer, battalion chief for Lake Valley, doesn’t even remember how or when he met the chief – but before he started as a volunteer in 1992.

“He is extremely approachable. This district is his passion. These guys and gals here are his passion. He has a huge heart, but also a firm hand,” Kauffer said.

Kauffer remembers a call when he was a firefighter and Michael was a captain. They were at a structure fire, in the kitchen area of the two-story house. As they were going forward all of a sudden a bed falls through the ceiling, inches from them.

“We almost got taken out by a bed. We still can crack up about it to this day,” Kauffer said.

Changing times

Michael has seen many changes in his career that has solely been with Lake Valley. The 1970 South Tahoe High School graduate started at the department in 1975 as a volunteer. Four years later he was hired full time. In all that time he never called in sick.

First aid equipment was left over from World War II when he started – which was 30 years after the war ended. It was in the mid-1980s that firefighters per California law became emergency medical technicians

One thing he would do differently is become a paramedic.

“They are quite spectacular out there in the field when you see them with the life-saving abilities they have at their fingertips,” Michael said.

He points to the agreement Lake Valley and South Lake Tahoe have with the county to provide ambulance service as something to be proud of. He is excited telemetry units in ambulances that link right to doctors at Barton Memorial Hospital are being tested. That should all be permanent within six months.

Another thing Michael points to when it comes to patient care is the creation of the backcountry bags. It allows his men and women to go off trail with a small amount of meds, a heart monitor and be able to set up an IV for someone injured in the woods.

One legacy he leaves behind is being an integral part in developing the fire academy at Lake Tahoe Community College. He points to Virginia Boyar at the college as the person who deserves the bulk of the credit.

However, Michael is not a big believer in the need to consolidate fire agencies on the South Shore or shut stations. A lot of that has to do with Lake Valley, South Lake Tahoe and Tahoe-Douglas operating with two people to an engine. The only way to get more personnel to the scene is to have another engine arrive.

Mutual aid is huge between agencies in the basin.

“We have always had consolidation talks. It has to be done for a reason besides money; it has to be because of better service. It has to be because taxpayers in the long run will make out on this. I don’t see it being at that point right now,” Michael said.

What’s next?

Michael and his wife plan to spend the bulk of their time on their 40-acre ranch near Markleeville. He'll be tending to the chickens, crops and fruit trees. Retirement will also give him more time to spend with his three grandchildren.

As for his replacement, the five-member board that governs the fire district will go over the applications at the May 12 meeting. This is the first time the board has opened the position to applicants outside of the department.

"It's bittersweet," Michael says of leaving. "I'm always a proponent that change is good. They can get someone new in there, with new ideas."