

Lou and Maria Dempsey: Weston's 2011 Citizens of the Year

Written by Patricia Gay

Wednesday, 23 March 2011 10:49



A couple who spearheaded a project to make sure residents in Weston were protected from carbon monoxide poisoning has been named the town's 2011 Citizens of the Year by the Weston Police Commission.

The commission announced on Tuesday, March, 15, it had selected Lou and Maria Dempsey of Tobacco Road to receive this year's honor.

Every year since 1986, members of the Police Commission have recognized as the Weston Citizen of the Year an individual, or individuals, who they believe have made a significant contribution to elevate the standards of law enforcement, safety, or good citizenship in Weston.

The Dempseys were nominated by John Pokorny, chief of the Weston Volunteer Fire Department. In a letter to the Police Commission, Mr. Pokorny said the Dempseys had put forth a tireless effort to install carbon monoxide detectors in Weston homes.

"Lou and Maria Dempsey epitomize the character, energy, integrity and accomplishment that defines the Police Commission's Citizen of the Year award," Mr. Pokorny wrote.

Assisted by members of the Weston Volunteer Fire Department and Weston Emergency Services, last year the Dempseys distributed 1,600 carbon monoxide detectors to Weston households.

The initiative was born from a personal tragedy that struck the family in 2008. On Thanksgiving night, Ms. Dempsey lost her sister Caroline Lofgren, her brother in law, Parker, and her niece and nephew Sophie and Owen, to carbon monoxide poisoning.

The Lofgrens were on vacation in Aspen, Colo., when the home they were staying in filled with deadly carbon monoxide fumes from a faulty heating system, killing the family in their sleep.

The home was not equipped with a carbon monoxide detector. If it had been, the family most likely would have awakened and been saved.

The family's deaths inspired a bill in Colorado requiring carbon monoxide detectors in all new homes and homes for sale.

The loss was extremely hard for the Dempseys who were close to the Lofgrens. "They were such an incredible, vibrant family," Ms. Dempsey said.

Silent killer

Approximately 1,500 Americans die each year from accidental exposure to carbon monoxide, according to the American Medical Association.

Carbon monoxide poisoning occurs after the inhalation of carbon monoxide gas (CO), produced by incomplete burning of combustible materials such as natural gas, oil, charcoal and wood.

Because CO is colorless, odorless, tasteless, and non-irritating, it is difficult for people to detect and is called "the silent killer."

After the death of the Lofgrens, the Dempseys wanted to do something special to honor their memories and decided to mount a campaign to make sure homes in Weston were equipped with CO detectors.

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As a member of the Weston Volunteer Fire Department, Mr. Dempsey reached out to other members for help. "I was amazed at the amount of support we received," Mr. Dempsey said.

A Carbon Monoxide Committee was formed for the purpose of crafting a town ordinance requiring the installation of CO detectors in homes and designing a program to distribute CO detectors to homes that needed them.

After the ordinance passed last year, volunteers surveyed homeowners to find out which homes had detectors and which needed them. To get as much information as possible, some volunteers even set up shop outside the polls on Election Day.

"I can't even begin to tell you the amount of time this program took to implement," Mr. Dempsey said.

"The idea was embraced by the entire town," Ms. Dempsey added.

Volunteers worked with Kidde safety products company to purchase and distribute 1,600 detectors.

The Dempseys hope Weston's CO initiative will serve as a model for other communities.

Emotional energy

The couple worked as a team and put a lot of emotional energy into the CO project.

Originally from Larchmont, N.Y., Ms. Dempsey is the executive vice president of marketing for the Clarins cosmetics company.

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For the past two and a half years, she has worked full time with Clarins, while Mr. Dempsey left his job in asset management to stay home and care for the family.

“Having Maria work the kind of job she did allowed me to devote the necessary time for the CO project,” Mr. Dempsey said.

Mr. Dempsey has also been working on getting a master’s degree in environmental policy. As a member of the town’s Sustainability Committee, he has a strong interest in renewable energy.

The couple moved to Weston from Greenwich eight years ago, and have two children, Luke, 13, and Jack, 11, who attend Weston Middle School. “I’m very proud of my parents,” said Luke.

Ms. Dempsey’s father, Fred Feuerbach, is also proud of the work the couple has accomplished, and is especially grateful for the sacrifice Mr. Dempsey made for the good of the family. “The impact on our family is ever present and part of our family’s fabric. But in the midst of this sadness, Lou has been a terrific and tremendous support to all of us,” Mr. Feuerbach said.

Mr. Feuerbach hopes a message can get out to college kids, who travel a lot, to take a portable CO detector with them wherever they go.

Citing a CO tragedy last year in Florida that killed several students in a motel, the Dempseys said they always take a battery-operated CO detector when they travel to give them some peace of mind and security.

Right thing

Weston Police Chief John Troxell said the commission did the right thing choosing the Dempseys as Citizens of the Year.

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“It’s a fantastic choice. They made lemonade out of lemons in the biggest way. We’ll never know how many lives they saved with the detectors they installed,” he said.

Rick Phillips, chairman of the Police Commission, said it was especially hard to choose a Citizen of the Year because there were many good nominees. However, he said the Dempseys stood out because of their commitment to public safety.

“We know the passion they put into the CO project and how hard they worked to tie together multiple organizations to get it done,” he said.

The Dempseys join the ranks of other Westonites who were honored as Citizen of the Year.

The first recipient, in 1986, was Weston Police Detective Carl Filsinger. Other recipients include last year’s honoree Fred Schneider, Betsy Peyreigne and Teri Gaberman, Joe Abruzzi, Dawn Egan, Walt and Sandy Dadik, Lyette Segerdahl, Dominick Renzulli, Robert Remus (Sgt. Slaughter), Anthony Sadukas, Joseph McAleenan, Diane Lederer, Jean McNeill, David Geismar, Edward McGrath, Blake Hampton, Peg Bisceglie, Margaret Robinson, Peter Meehan, Roger Core, James M. Daniel, Donald Gary, Robert Studwell, John Pokorny, Charles Pokorny, David Brown and James Magee.

The Dempseys will be presented with an award by the Police Commission at the start of the Annual Town Budget Meeting on Wednesday, April 6, at 8 p.m. at Weston High School.

Dempseys thank those who helped with the CO project

It took a village to ensure the success of the carbon monoxide project in Weston. The Dempseys said they would like to share the Citizen of the Year award with everyone in the village of Weston who helped:

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Members of Carbon Monoxide Committee: Joe Abruzzi, Woody Bliss, Dave Burns, Craig Cohen, Lou Dempsey, Carl Filsinger, Curtis Gunn, John Pokorny, Larry Roberts and Jon Weingarten.

Block leaders who organized lists and distributed CO detectors: Bruce Ando, Steve Ash, Beth Berkowitz, Jeffrey Bernhard, Mark Blake, Terry Blake, Roger Bos, John Braden, Todd Bucaro, Sandra Buckle, Patrick Burns, Max Burns, Bryan Campbell, Mark Campbell, Gary Clayton, Dana Coates, Walter Dadik, Brian DeMarco, Paul Deysenroth, Jon Dillon, Neil Druks, Sal Gianeiit, Bill Gluck, Damian Greene, Stephan Grozinger, John Kaczmarczyk, Jeff Kendall, Marilyn Kirchner, Evan Kleban, Ken Kleban, Rob LaPlaca, Brian Ligett, Beth Low, Karyl McGill, Jim McGuire, Paul Melancon, Chuck Noble, Sue Parkinson, Lynn Pokorny, Joseph Rainone, Larry Rehr, Sondra Roberts, Roger Roth, Steve Russo, Michael Schlecter, Lyette Segerdahl, Walter Shanley, Jeff Simonoff, Diane Slovak, Hoskins Smith, Michael Smith, Craig Smith, Matthew Squance, Peter Stack, Giselle Vogel and Rob Weiss.

Election Day survey volunteers: Susan Byer, Michelle Bradley, Sarah Cohen, Bean Corcoran, Nadine Dawkins, Suzy Jones and Regina Metviner.

Members of the Weston High School Key Club who helped with surveys on Election Day.