

Spetly will lead Weston parade on Memorial Day

Written by Patricia Gay
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A longtime volunteer firefighter who served his country in World War II will be leading the Weston Memorial Day parade this year. Joe Spetly, a 47-year resident of Weston, has been named the parade's 2011 grand marshal.

Mr. Spetly, 83, has a distinguished track record of community service with the town. For 45 years, he was an active member of the Weston Volunteer Fire Department, and despite a knee replacement, is still involved with the fire police, directing traffic at fire and accident scenes.

Mr. Spetly served a relatively brief stint in the military. He was drafted by the U.S. Army in 1945 when he was 18, just as World War II was ending. He served as a corporal with the military police and was stationed in Washington, D.C.

"There were 400,000 soldiers on their way home at the time. My job was to patrol the roadways leading to the Pentagon and do patrols in town. I also helped out at Arlington National Cemetery and became part of the honor guard there when families requested one," he said.

When he was initially drafted, Mr. Spetly said he expected to go through basic training and then head out to Japan for three years. "I was advised to sign up for an 18-month tour because at least then I knew when I would be back, so I did," Mr. Spetly said.

Originally from Chicago, Mr. Spetly acknowledged that his time in the military was a vastly different experience from many others who served.

"My brother Alex was in the Battle of the Bulge and was a POW in the war. While he was serving time in a camp in Germany, he lost about 65 pounds. He was only given a piece of bread and cup of soup a day," Mr. Spetly said.

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Things were so bad in Germany that by the end of the war, even the Germans were starving. "They had nothing to eat either," Mr. Spetly said.

Mr. Spetly's brother was also forced to clean the streets and bury dead bodies. "There was a lot of bombing and demolition and the POWs were sent to clean things up," Mr. Spetly said.

As bleak as things were, Mr. Spetly said Alex told him that every now and then, as the prisoners of war were marching back to the camp from work, a door would open and someone would reach out and hand a loaf of bread to one of the men passing by. "My brother never forgot there were a lot of good people there, too," Mr. Spetly said.

After the war, Mr. Spetly's brother returned and became a jewelry designer and led a normal life, Mr. Spetly said.

Mr. Spetly's cousins were in the armed services, too, as well as his brother-in-law, Sigmund Swarski. "He was wounded in Salerno, Italy," Mr. Spetly said.

After the war, Mr. Spetly moved back to the Windy City and went to Wright College for one year. He met his wife Dolores when his girlfriend at the time said her friend needed a date to the prom, and asked him to take her. The couple hit it off and started spending time together and roller skating.

They were married in 1952 and enjoyed a long marriage until Ms. Spetly died in 2000. The couple have two children, Joseph Spetly and Barbara Spetly McClung, and one grandchild, Jennifer McClung.

As a young man, Mr. Spetly worked for a time in the finance department of an automobile company before he got a job as a manufacturer's representative, which sent him to the East Coast. He and his wife decided to settle down in Weston, but as they did, his job fizzled out.

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Mr. Spetly decided to get his bus driver's license and took a job driving school buses for the town of Weston.

At the time, the town owned and managed its own fleet of buses, and Mr. Spetly was promoted to transportation director for the Weston public schools, a position he enjoyed for 30 years until he retired.

Even as transportation director, he continued to drive the buses, filling in when someone was out sick.

"I did it for so long that I would get to know these kids on their very first day of school, and would watch them as they became seniors and graduated. I got a big bang out of that," he said.

When dealing with the occasionally unruly child on the bus, Mr. Spetly said he had some magic words to get them to behave. "I would say, 'you just bought the seat in back of me and you own it until I sell it to someone else.'"

Fire Department

When his son was young, Mr. Spetly volunteered with the Boy Scouts. He also served for a time on the Republican Town Committee in the 1980s, but the group that interested him the most was the Fire Department and EMS.



"I joined EMS, which was called the First Aid Squad at the time, in 1970 and took courses at Norwalk Hospital," Mr. Spetly said. He served on the squad for 13 years.

As a 40-year member of the fire department, Mr. Spetly served in several capacities — eight years as president, four years as third lieutenant, three years as civilian defense coordinator, and several more years with the fire police, following a knee replacement.

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Mark Harper, a fellow firefighter, recalled a time when Mr. Spetly was in the right place at the right time.

“There was a house fire on Steep Hill Road, and I was on the roof when it started to collapse beneath me. I had to jump off and luckily I landed in the arms of Joe and another firefighter. Joe is a big guy and I was happy to see him there. In my estimation, he saved my life,” Mr. Harper said.

Mr. Harper said Mr. Spetly was very diligent when he was president of the fire department and also recalled that he and his wife Dolores were great dancers at firehouse functions.

“They would do the polka, and all kinds of dances. Joe was a wicked good dancer. He’s a great human being,” Mr. Harper said.

Another firefighter friend, Joe Abruzzi, said while many things can be said about Mr. Spetly’s long years of service to the town, it was at the Relay for Life event on Friday, May 13, where Mr. Spetly’s character spoke.

At the event, various groups, including firefighters, walked around the Weston High School track throughout the night, raising money for the American Cancer Society.

“I pulled up around 11:30 that night to do my laps and noticed Joe pull up at the same time,” Mr. Abruzzi said. “Joe is still recuperating from leg surgery and is using a cane so I thought it was nice of him to come out so late at night to cheer us on. Well, by the time I got geared up and started my walk, I noticed Joe making his way around the track, cane and all. No fanfare. He just got out of his car and starting walking for the next hour and a half. I think this exemplifies the kind of dedication Joe has lived by all his life.”