

Mike Pontius, a Freeport firefighter, was called to duty on Saturday, June 16, 2001, to help put out an apartment fire. While working in the attic of the apartment, Mike was overcome with heat. His fellow firefighters carried him to safety and hosed him down to lower his body temperature. He was taken to Freeport Hospital for heat exhaustion/heat stroke. He was given a work-release for two days and went back to work. Unfortunately, Mike's body never fully recovered from that day's event. His body was unable to handle the heat that firefighters are exposed to on a daily basis.

In the fall of 2003, Mike's body started showing symptoms. His behavior and decision-making changed. His cognitive functions were hampered. He experienced blurred vision and slurred speech. His gait changed to a "propulsive gait" a stooped, rigid posture with the head and neck bent forward. Mike's family doctor ordered a MRI. He was sent to UW-Madison for further testing with a specialist. The MRI indicated that Mike's brain was approximately 25 years older than his actual age. Radiologist reports stated exposure to a chemical "toluene" might have caused these changes. The doctors feel that over time, the chemicals that Mike was exposed to caused the premature demyelination of the white brain matter. Demyelination is a degenerative process that erodes away the myelin sheath (insulating layer) that normally protects nerve fibers. Demyelination exposes these fibers and appears to cause problems in nerve impulse conduction that may affect many physical systems.

Mike's past, present and future medical expenses are great. His current health is the following:

- Health is slowly declining, legs are becoming weaker
- Needs to be carried from home to car on days he cannot walk
- Requires 7 days a week care, 24 hours a day for his safety
- Handicap accessibility in the home is needed to accommodate Mike's care
- Personality and behavior changes are continuing and cognitive functions are declining

Mike's future needs will be the following:

- A handicap-accessible van
- A handicap-accessible entrance to the home
- A handicap-accessible bathroom is needed in the home
- A lift system is needed in the house for Personal Assistants and family members to move Mike from bed to wheelchair, etc...

Mike is a 1975 graduate from Aquin High School. He spent many years working and volunteering his time for Aquin. In his 29 years at the school, Mike wore many hats such as janitorial, coaching basketball and football, assistant director of theatre, co-chairman to many functions, and was an official IHSA basketball referee.

Mike and his wife, Dawn, have four children.

- Josh graduated from Aquin in 2006
- Jordan will graduate this year from Aquin
- Jerek is a sophomore at Aquin
- Kirsten is a 7th grader at Aquin.

The old adage, "It takes a village to raise a child", is true and in this case a family from the Freeport Community needs our help. Mike is a hero for the work he has done for the community and the sacrifices he has made.