

EMERGENCY SERVICES

American Legion unveils hometown hero banner for Matthew LeTourneau

By Ginger Rae Dunbar
Special to Medianet Group

There is no greater love than this, that a person would lay down his life for his friends.

Saturday marked the inauguration of the Springfield Hometown Hero Banner program by the American Legion Post 227. The first banner unveiled Saturday honors Springfield native Matthew LeTourneau, a captain with the Philadelphia Fire Department and a longtime volunteer of Springfield Fire Co., who died in the line of duty.

"I can't imagine a better start to the program than to honor Matt's sacrifice," said Rich Debany, Commander of Post 227.

LeTourneau died after becoming trapped in a structural collapse while battling a rowhome fire in Philadelphia on Jan. 6, 2018. The collapse injured two other Philadelphia firefighters and the homeowner perished in the fire. A Philadelphia Fire Department firefighter since 2007, LeTourneau was promoted to lieutenant in 2015 and promoted to captain posthumously. LeTourneau, who served with Engine 45/Platoon A, was poised to be promoted to captain shortly prior to his death.

"I envision many, many, many banners decorating our streets in Springfield to honor these heroes," Debany said. "To all the first-responders that are here today, and to all the veterans, thank you from myself, my family and our entire community, for everything that you do to sacrifice your time and to put your lives in danger, so that the rest of us can be safe."

A Springfield chief officer, who wished to remain anonymous, said during the ceremony held at the firehouse that this banner is about remembering the life of LeTourneau, and not his death.

"His contributions, his passion for the fire service, remember that every time you see the banner right here in front of the firehouse," he said. "Matt was the definition of brother-



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Rich Debany, Commander of Post 227, speaks during a ceremony Saturday prior to unveiling the banner in honor of Matthew LeTourneau, a Springfield native.

hood and sisterhood in the fire service."

The banner is displayed on a utility pole across the street from the firehouse on Saxer Avenue.

"He spent so much time here," the chief officer said with emphasis, and the crowd laughed. "Dedication and service is what Matt embodied. Everything he did in the fire service, he excelled. He reached so many people with teaching."

LeTourneau joined the Springfield Fire Co. in 1991 at 16 years of age, the youngest allowed at that time. As the years went on, LeTourneau became known as someone who loved to

train and teach others at the firehouse. He went on to become a county and state fire instructor, teaching at the Delaware County Emergency Services Training Center and throughout the Commonwealth.

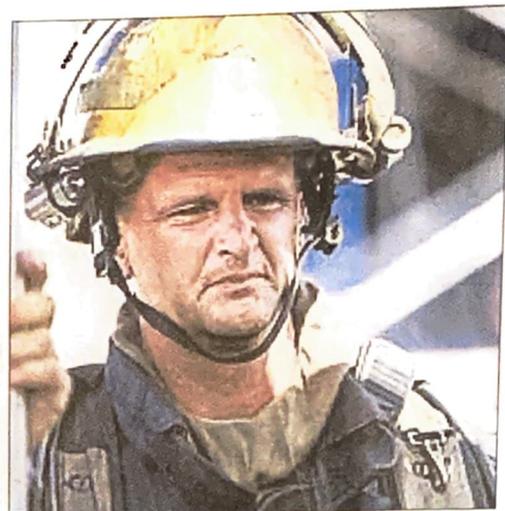
"We are all so proud of what Matt accomplished as a firefighter, an officer and an instructor," said Janice LeTourneau, Matthew's mother.

Janice LeTourneau thanked the crowd and the firefighters from surrounding areas for attending. She thanked the American Legion for honoring Matthew, as well as its future projects to honor the mil-

itary and first-responder heroes.

In addition to honoring veterans as well as military personnel who were killed or missing in action, the banner program will honor first-responders, including police officers, firefighters and emergency medical services personnel. There will be a total of 10 banners displayed throughout town by Memorial Day. Several other municipalities throughout Delaware County have started such a program.

Bill Smeck, vice commander of Post 227, helped unveil the banner, along with LeTourneau's niece,



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Hailey LeTourneau and Demetrios Vlassopoulos, retired deputy chief of the District of Columbia and life member of the Springfield Fire Co. Smeck, who helped initiate the banner program, has traveled throughout the world to military cemeteries and he wants to honor local heroes who have served and those who have died in the line of

duty.

"It has always been a passion for me to put a face to a tombstone," Smeck said. "These people had families. They are not just a statistic or a casualty. They had moms, dads, siblings, relatives and friends who loved them. I want to put a face to a name. We can show honor to people by installing the banners."