



Weather Contact

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Hero officer honored for his sacrifice 50 years later



By **JACQUELYN MOOREHEAD, Valley Breeze & Observer Staff Writer**

SMITHFIELD – Fifty years ago, on a cold and windy day, probationary officer Norman Vezina of the Smithfield Police Department responded to a call to rescue a 5-year-old boy fighting to stay above the surface of the frozen waters at the Spragueville Reservoir.

Vezina's cousin, Marilyn Bellemore, retold the story of the day Vezina forever became an unforgettable Smithfield hero.

On Dec. 10, 1968, two days after his 38th birthday, Vezina arrived at the scene before fire and rescue units. Running to the water to save the drowning boy, he removed his outerwear, gun belt and wallet and dove

into the icy waters.

Vezenia, a Korean War Marine veteran and Purple Heart recipient serving less than six months on the force, reached the boy, Kenneth Firby, and they struggled their way back to shore. Previous attempts to rope in the boy to safety by a neighbor had failed.

Subsequent attempts by other fire personnel to lasso the pair failed, and they disappeared from the surface one final time, their bodies discovered later that day.



Officer Vezenia was posthumously promoted to sergeant, and is remembered today through the memorial Sgt. Norman G. Vezenia Community and Training Room at the Smithfield Police Station, 215 Pleasant View Ave, dedicated in his name last year.

On Monday, Police Chief Richard St. Sauveur remembered the 50th anniversary of Vezenia's heroic sacrifice with a ceremony and the unveiling of a time capsule.

Across the street, the frozen water of the Stillwater Reservoir acted as a reminder of that day, shining grayish blue through the windows of the training room.

St. Sauveur pulled the blinds down halfway to cover the distraction during the ceremony's speeches and blessing.

"This is the saddest day in history for the Smithfield Police Department," the chief said. "It is a day to remember the man and courageous hero, and to continue to remember him."

A display of Vezenia's war medals, magazine clippings, photographs and a letter to the Vezenia family signed by President Lyndon Johnson is mounted on the wall of the training room, opposite a shadow box containing the wallet he tossed aside half a century ago.

The chief remarked how the wallet still has his final paystub in it. Vezenia's nephew, Russell Ochteau, and grandniece, Jennifer Shaker, donated the medals and wallet to the station to memorialize Vezenia forever.

"This is incredible. Fifty years ago and he is still remembered as a hero. He was a hero to our family long before he joined the force," Ochteau said.

He remembers the day like it was yesterday, Ochteau said. He remembers the looks on the faces of his aunt and uncle when they heard the news on that sad day in 1968. Even 50 years later, the emotions of the day come back to him.

"Thank you for helping keep his memory alive," he said.

Ochteau said though it is a sad day for his family, he also remembers Kenneth Firby and his untimely death. Firby was playing by his home on Deer Run Trail when he fell down an embankment and broke through the ice surface of the reservoir.

"Life was over too fast for him. I think about his family often," Ochteau said.

A donated 155mm Howitzer powder can, used for cannon shot in the Korean War and painted in Smithfield Police Department colors and seal, will be used for the time capsule.

Inside, contemporary items such as a Motorola portable radio, all current SPD patches and patrol officer badge, a Nov. 6 general election sample ballot, a Dec. 6 edition of The Valley Breeze & Observer newspaper, the Providence Journal article covering President George H.W. Bush's death, and an SPD employee directory will all be saved.

The capsule will sit encased in plexiglas for 50 years, to be opened on the 100th anniversary of Vezina's sacrifice.

The Smithfield Police Department also created a memorial page on its website, www.smithfieldpd.com , for Vezina, including links to the Police and Fire Department reports from Dec. 10, 1968.



Sgt. Norman Vezina's nephew, Russell Ochteau and his daughter, Jennifer Shaker join Smithfield Police Chief Richard St. Sauveur during the unveiling of a time capsule memorialized on the 50-year anniversary of Vezina's death. (Breeze photo by Jacquelyn Moorehead)

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