

*Safety Smarts 10/22/2003*

*Peterborough Fire/Rescue Member Profile*

**By Eric Bowman, Firefighter, Peterborough Fire/Rescue**

In July of 2003, firefighter Jim Graham joined the Peterborough Fire and Rescue Association. The beginning of Graham's service was met without much fanfare—he is one of literally hundreds of Peterborough residents to be initiated into the ranks of the fire/rescue service. However, Graham's membership is distinct in that he is one of only two members of the PFR (Meas Rouen being the other) to have been born in and lived much of his life in another country. His perspective as a foreigner provides insight about voluntarism in a community such as ours.

“I was born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada and have lived in eight Canadian cities and towns,” Graham explained. One can still detect the Canadian accent when Graham speaks, and it is common for him to sprinkle a MacKenzie-brothers-sounding “eh” into conversation. He is proud to be Canadian, but he loves his adopted home. “I moved to Peterborough in November of 2002. I had my choice of towns and cities but chose New Hampshire for its friendly people—and the taxes are nice too,” Graham joked. A specialist in Health Care Hardware and Software Technologies for Dell Computer Corporation, Graham was given a choice when asked to relocate with his wife, Kim. “The town website helped in deciding [what town we would move to]. It gave me all the information that I needed on the town as well as what was going on,” Graham explained. No doubt, the Peterborough Fire Rescue website was a part of this research. Graham and his wife Kim visited Peterborough, recalling that the first night they were here was a “First Friday” in the downtown shops. When they witnessed the sense of community and

the vitality of downtown, they were sold. "We looked for houses the next day and found our current residence the following weekend." The sense of community in Peterborough was obvious—and exactly what the Grahams were looking for.

Graham brought with him, among other things, a desire to serve his community. A veteran of the Canadian Army, Graham knew what it meant to serve. "I tend to volunteer more when I live in a small community," he explained. In other cities, Graham volunteered for the United Way, helped at-risk children, and worked for Shared Life, a Canadian Catholic Charities organization. "You get roped into things more in a small town because everybody knows you. When something comes up, you just do it," Graham said, half joking. But no one knew him when he moved to Peterborough. Still, he found himself signing up to help. This, according to Graham, is because America is different from his native land. "People assimilate more quickly in the U.S.," Graham explained. "We have foreigners here in town and they get involved. In Canada, people tend to keep their culture more. In Canada, I might be a Scots-Canadian, but in America, I would be an *American* of Scottish descent. There is a difference." Such a tradition has made Graham feel welcome in this community. "And I hope I can stay."

In Peterborough, there is also a tradition of service—neighbor helping neighbor—that Graham values. This, he believes, comes partially from our libertarian tradition in New Hampshire. "In Canada we have a socialist government. Citizens have come to expect the government to help in all matters. I feel like [in Canada] we actually have fewer people volunteering for the fire department and things like it because they count on the government." We don't have that problem with the historically hands-off government of New Hampshire. Here, according to Graham, it has always been "every

man for himself,” which isn't always a bad thing. This means that people are willing to volunteer to help, because they know there is no "big government" waiting to swoop in to help. Nothing will get done without voluntarism. In fact, Graham feels that firefighters and rescue personnel in departments such as Peterborough's are even more dedicated because they know their neighbors need them.

Graham is struck by the diversity of neighbors offering their help to the PFR. “When many people think of the big city fire department they think its all brawn, a tough, blue collar service. We have it all in Peterborough. The members all have other jobs. We have firefighters who are consultants, teachers, welders...all types of jobs,” Graham reflected. Yet the way the PFR gets things done is the same as a professional fire department. “The way we treat our retired members and chiefs is amazing—just like the big city.” This adds to the sense of tradition and family at the PFR. And the department has strong leadership. “We have an interim chief and have had changes in our leadership and we still get things done. Leaders teach our members without pulling rank on them. When people make mistakes, we learn from them, we are never belittled by the officers.” This, according to Graham, is why so few members quit the ranks of the PFR. “I remember coupling a hose the wrong way, and Chief Winters took me aside and showed me how to do it. He didn't belittle me. That made a big difference because I am down here on my own time. We are all giving what we can.”

And some can give less and less. Jim and Kim Graham are expecting their first child in November. He realizes this means his time at the fire station will be even more limited. But he will continue to volunteer because he loves it and he loves his (new) town. Why should other people consider joining PFR? “Because of the skills they learn,

a great bunch of folks to volunteer with, and giving back to a wonderful community,” Graham answered. And, he might remind us, because it is part of the New Hampshire tradition. Is it ironic that we should be reminded of the "New Hampshire way" by a Canadian? Not really. Sometimes we need the perspective of an outsider to remind us what makes this country, and this state, a great place in which to live.

For more information about the Peterborough Fire and Rescue Association, visit our website at [www.firerescue.us](http://www.firerescue.us).