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DeWitt has 'Brother Fireman'

Franciscan brother is volunteer firefighter



Staff photo by NORRIS INGELS

Brother Kirk Munn just another volunteer firefighter.

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In DeWitt city, through the bleached white of U.S. 27 and the strip of gas stations and stores that are the downtown area, is a pine tree-lined road cleaving its way up through green manicured hills.

This is no ordinary road. At the top are two gold brick buildings with dorm windows. The first building is the Franciscan Retreat House, the second, the Friary.

The Friary is the home of Brother Kirk Munn, who lives with six other friars and priests in the originally Hungarian order. Brother Kirk is no ordinary friar, for aside from his maintenance duties at the retreat, he is assistant engineer on the DeWitt City Volunteer Fire Department.

Brother Kirk, 34, has been a volunteer since 1970. At first, he admits, his brothers weren't too happy about his fire-fighting activities and felt that he should stay closer to the monastery. But they've come to accept his interest in the community, Munn says.



IT ALL STARTED in 1968, Munn recalls, when an accident at the Friary left one brother a double amputee. The brothers decided then that there should be one resident brother who knew how to administer first aid. Kirk and another brother joined first aid classes at DeWitt's volunteer fire department in 1969.

Munn says it was then that he began to try to volunteer. By the time Munn got permission from his brothers at the Friary to join and a space opened on the fire department, it was 1971.

A year later, due to a conflict with one of the elder brothers over his extracurricular activities, Munn was sent to a brother parish in Roebling, N.J., where he immediately signed up with the volunteer fire department. During his eight years in Roebling, he joined the Civil Air Patrol becoming a 2nd

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Brother heeds the beeper's call

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lieutenant. He also joined the Roebling ambulance squad.

LAST YEAR he was transferred back to DeWitt. Part of Munn's duties in Roebling was working with kids - as altar boys and on sports teams. Munn smiles a little sadly when he remembers his eight years there. "I miss working with kids," he says.

When Munn returned to DeWitt, he moved immediately into an opening on the fire department. Munn says he used to come back to DeWitt on vacations to help at the retreat and would participate in fire-fighting when he was here.

Munn, who is strikingly open, recalls one visit when he left the retreat in his habit to assist in a fire. He was gone for several hours, and when he came back he noticed all the brothers sniffing the air, wondering where the smell of smoke was coming from.

Now Munn wears jeans on calls, just as he does when working at the retreat. Hooked to his belt is a "beeper", which he brought from Roebling, and hooked in the DeWitt alarm system.

MUNN TRIES to make every call. There are times, he says, when he has a call late at night and doesn't return until just before the 6:30 a.m. prayer service. But Munn says the brothers don't mind that much anymore. As long as he gets his chores done, cutting the front half of the 100 acres of grass on which the retreat sits and taking care of the vehicles and the retreat, any extra time is his own.

Munn finds it hard to estimate the number of hours he puts in weekly at the department, but he does say that he's spent a lot of his free time there



Brother Kirk Munn ready for fire run

and at the Lansing-based "Burgess Squadron" of the Civil Air Patrol as a supply officer.

Munn arrived at the retreat in 1964, fresh out of high school in Flint. He says he knew he wanted to be a brother, and his "quite religious" mother, suggested the retreat.

It took Munn the normal seven years to be a brother, he says, after he lived at the retreat for three years, spent a year learning the ministry in New York, and took three years of simple vows before taking his solemn vows and earning his habit.

Munn says he enjoys the quiet of retreat life. The brothers, he says, "help each other out and take care of each other. The whole group keeps this

place floating. It is not self-sufficient by any means."

MUNN AND other volunteer fire-fighters are paid five dollars an hour while they are on a run. Kirk says he keeps this money to buy things like his own fire-fighting uniform so he can meet the fire-fighters at the scene "because they're so quick that by the time I'm down to the road, they're pulling out of the station."

There are no vacancies on the fire department crew. In fact, Munn says, there is a waiting list.

Munn says he enjoys himself as a volunteer fire-fighter. "It's nice to have the honor to work with people as dedicated as the volunteer fire department in this town."