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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 04, 2015

Remarks by the President at 34th Fallen Firefighters Memorial Service

Mount Saint Mary's University
Emmitsburg, Maryland

11:29 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Craig, thanks for that introduction, but more importantly, thank you for the outstanding work that you and your team do all across the country every single day. For those of you who know Craig, you know that he is cool under pressure, no doubt because he got his start -- started his career as a firefighter. I want to thank Congressman Steny Hoyer, Fire Administrator Ernest Mitchell, Chief Dennis Compton, and everybody at the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation for bringing us together here today. And most especially, I want to say how honored I am to be with the families of the fallen, and express the gratitude of the nation for the sacrifices that you and your families have made on behalf of others.

Scripture tells us, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." Employ it in serving one another. Every single day, across our country, men and women leave their homes and their families so they might save the lives of people that they've never met. They are good stewards -- serving their neighbors, their communities, our nation with courage, and fortitude and strength. We can never repay them fully for their sacrifices.

But today, we gather to honor 87 brave firefighters who gave their lives in service to us all. Our prayers are with their families, many of whom honor us with their presence today. You remember them as moms and dads, siblings and spouses, friends and neighbors. Today, we remember them and salute them as the heroes that they were.

It's hard to think of a more selfless profession than firefighting. There's a reason why firefighting occupies a special place in our imaginations; why little boys and increasingly little girls say, I want to be a fireman, I want to be a firefighter. They understand instinctually that there's something special about it. Imagine what it takes to put on that heavy coat, and that helmet, and override the natural human instinct for self-preservation, and run into danger as others are running away; to literally walk through fire knowing that you might never make it out because you're trying to save people that are strangers.

And yet, the fallen that we honor today would probably have said that they were just ordinary Americans who were doing work they believed in, carrying on a tradition as old as America itself. There's a humility that seems to be part of being a firefighter. From rural communities to inner cities, those we honor today lived a fundamental principle that binds us all as Americans -- that I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper, that we look out for one another, that there's something bigger than each of us individually that we have to be true to.

We honor men like Michael Garrett of West Virginia. Mikey, as he was known, started out as a junior firefighter at the age of 16, became an EMT by 18, was on his way to graduating with an associate degree in emergency services. His mom, Faith, says Mikey was always smiling, always a practical joker -- if you turned around, your cell phone would be in the pool. And he was always the guy you could call on in a pinch. No matter how busy he was -- between school and work and being an EMT instructor himself -- he'd be there to help.

And in February of last year, Mikey was pulling a seriously injured utility worker out of harm's way when a cell tower came crashing down. And he was only 28 years old -- 28 years old. He's survived by Faith, his dad Dale, his four siblings. And he will always be remembered by his community as a good man devoted to helping others -- that's who he was. And he typifies what it means to be a firefighter and to serve others.

That's who Kevin Bell was, too. Kevin was that rare combination of full-time firefighter and part-time DJ. His wife, Wayette, says that the day he graduated from the fire academy in Connecticut was one of the happiest days of his life. And he truly loved his work, and his kindness and generosity were widely known. And like so many firefighters, he never talked about his heroic actions. His daughter, Raquel, says that she would later hear from those he had helped, above and beyond the call of duty. The friend he had assisted after a car accident. The classmate he drove to the hospital after an epileptic seizure.

Last October, Kevin gave his life battling a house fire. He is survived by Wayette, and Raquel, his parents, and his siblings. Because of the role model Kevin was, there are African-American kids in his Hartford neighborhood who want to be firefighters just like him. And one day, they'll be able to go to work in the Kevin Lamont Bell Fire Station.

We honor heroes like Malcolm Jenkins of Louisville, Kentucky. Malcolm was the "go-to-guy" in the firehouse; no task was too big or too small. He was the guy who could fix anything, which his wife Sharon says taught his three daughters an important lesson: Marry a man who can fix everything that you can break. (Laughter.)

Malcolm was a farmer when, many years ago, the county put out the call for volunteer firefighters. He rose to become a major, and helped develop the Kentucky Regional Fire Training Academy, which has trained hundreds of firefighters to serve their communities. Last October, Malcolm succumbed to a heart attack. And today, in Malcolm Jenkins, we remember not just a great firefighter, but a loving son, husband, father, grandfather, and friend.

These are the kinds of individuals we honor today. And even as we honor these 87 heroes, we know that their work is carried on by firefighters all across our nation -- by so many of you -- with that same bravery, and that same dedication, that same sense of duty, that same humility, that same love of

country.

In recent years, you've battled some of the most severe wildfire seasons in American history. So far this year, nearly 50,000 wildfires have burned more than 9 million acres -- an area larger than the entire state of Maryland. At the season's peak, 32,000 firefighters were battling blazes from California to North Carolina. Thirteen have lost their lives. And today, we honor them as well. And we reaffirm that, as a nation, we must work to prevent fires, and we must give firefighters the equipment and the support that they need to get the job done and to come home safe -- that's what we owe every one of you. (Applause.)

And finally, this memorial also pays tribute to names that do not appear on this wall. It's a testament to you, the families of these individuals. The families who stand alongside every firefighter across this nation. Because the brotherhood of firefighting doesn't stop at the firehouse door. It extends to every community across our country -- to every mom and dad, every spouse, every child who waits for their loved one to come home at the end of a shift. All of you are united by an unbreakable bond of strength and sacrifice. This is your family, too.

For the families of the fallen, we know that words alone can't ease the pain of your loss. But perhaps it helps a little bit to know that the American people stand with you in honoring your loved ones. We admire them. We cherish the work that they do. We hold you in our hearts, today and always. We offer you our deepest condolences, and our prayers, and our eternal gratitude.

These are extraordinary people that we honor here today. They're extraordinary Americans. They set an example for us all. May God bless these fallen heroes. May he watch over their families and all who protect us. May their shining example inspire us all in our own lives -- "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

Thank you. (Applause.)

END

11:41 A.M. EDT

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