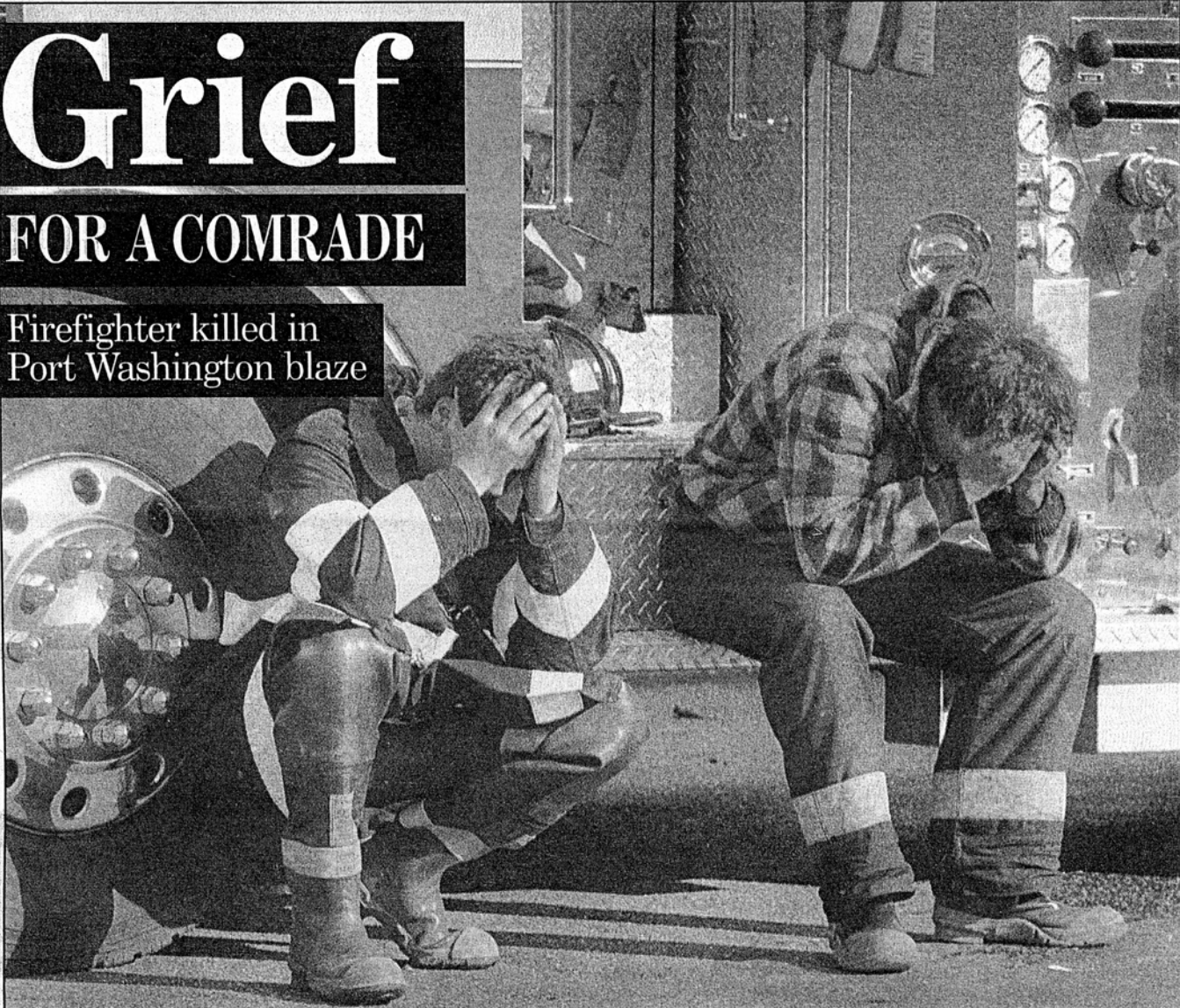


Sunday Newsday

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Grief FOR A COMRADE

Firefighter killed in
Port Washington blaze



Volunteer firefighters after learning that a colleague had been trapped in burning building. He later died.

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Firefighter Dies in Blaze

16 others injured as building burns in Port Washington

By Dele Olojede
and Kathy Boccella

A firefighter was killed and 16 others injured in a blaze that gutted a building in downtown Port Washington and left two families homeless yesterday, authorities said.

Robert Dayton, 28, a New York City firefighter and a lieutenant with the Port Washington Fire Department, died while searching for tenants in three second-floor apartments, said Supervisor Charles Parker of the Nassau County Fire Communications Center.

"He was commanding a search-and-rescue team, and because of the fire and the construction of the building he became disoriented," Parker said. "There was a maze of hallways and turns, and he just got really lost and became trapped and eventually ran out of air."

The fire, which broke out in the rear of the first floor in an antique store called The Cat Lady, has been labeled suspicious, Nassau County Assistant Fire Marshall Robert Doran said. An investigation by the fire marshal's office is continuing.

Fourteen firefighters were treated for smoke inhalation and minor cuts at St. Francis Hospital in Roslyn and released. One was admitted in fair condition and another was transported to North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset with second-degree burns on his legs, officials said.

Commenting on the high number of injuries, Port Washington Fire Chief Charles Lang said, "It was a tough fire. . . . It was a long operation. Guys went down, some of them trying to rescue other firemen."

The fire broke out at 7:30 a.m. and destroyed the antique store and three apartments at 165 Main St. before it was brought under control three hours later.

Lt. Silvio DiLucia of the Port Washington Police Department said the owner of the antique store called police at 7:30 a.m. to report the fire. The owner was at her home but had been alerted to the fire by an alarm system, he said.

Police evacuated five people from the apartments before firefighters arrived at the scene. One apartment was vacant.

The fire sent thick smoke billowing from the roof of the brick building and caused traffic snarls in the busy downtown area. Motorists

were detoured onto side streets and shops on both sides of the building remained closed throughout the day.

The windows of the antique store were shattered, exposing blackened merchandise.

Eighty firefighters from two departments responded to the blaze.

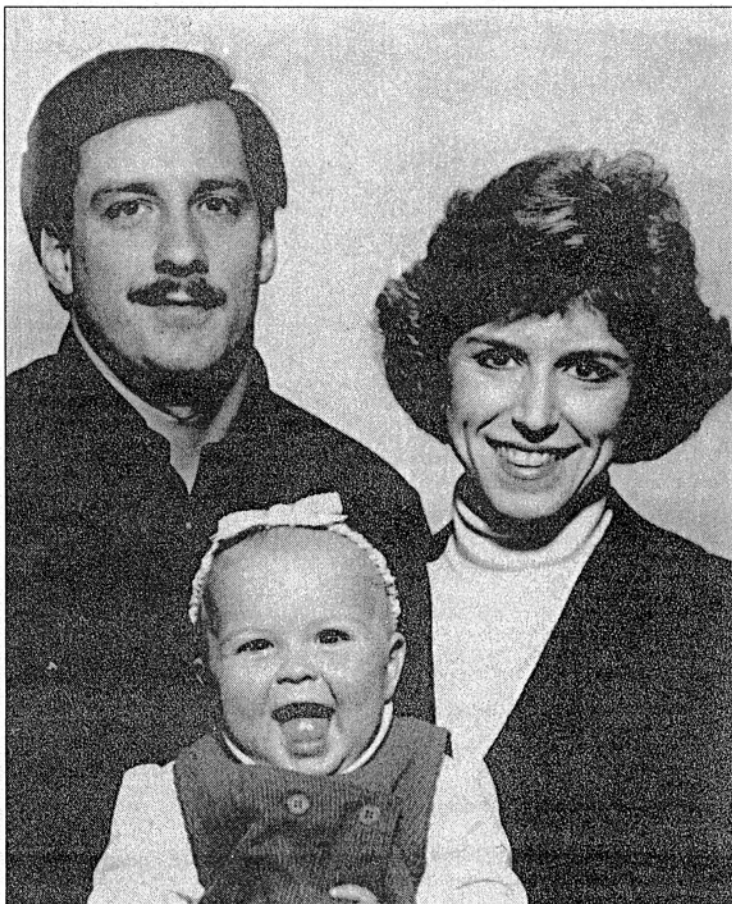
Dayton, married and the father of an 11-month-old girl, died at St. Francis Hospital. His death, the first for the village department in over 40 years, left his colleagues stunned and grief-stricken.

"He was a great guy," said Port Washington Fire Marshal Joseph Fico. "He was very active and dedicated and he knew what he was doing."

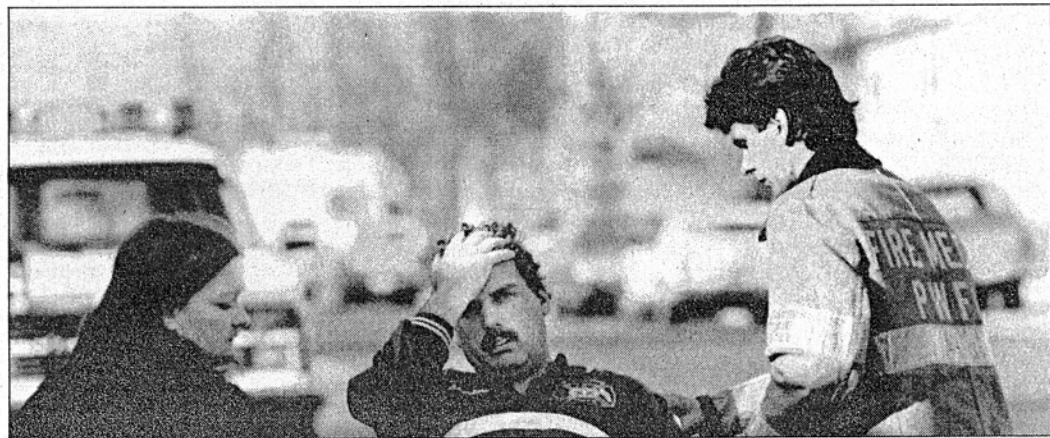
After the fire was quelled, firefighters stood quietly outside the charred building. "I can't talk about it. If I start, I'll . . ." one fireman said, his eyes filling with tears.

Last night, four generations of Dayton's family, along with close friends, gathered at his parents' house in Port Washington to comfort each other. His wife, Pamela, a medical student, said that when she saw the fire department chaplain come up their driveway, "I knew."

Dayton, who attended Paul B. Schreiber High School and studied computers at Nassau Community College, always wanted to be a firefighter, said his brother, James. At age 18, he joined the Port Washington department as a vol-



Robert Dayton is shown above with his wife, Pamela, and daughter, Kaitlin. Below, injured volunteer firefighter Billy Crooker is taken to the hospital.



Newsday / Michael E. Ach

Fireman Killed In Smoky Blaze

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unteer. Three years ago, he was accepted for an appointment as a New York City firefighter. "That was one of his proudest days," said James Dayton. Robert Dayton was assigned to a fire company in Queens.

Pamela Dayton said she and her husband attended his 10th high school reunion Friday night and planned to attend hers last night.

A viewing for Dayton will be held today from 7-9 p.m. and tomorrow from 2-4 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. at the Port Washington firehouse on Port Washington Boulevard. On Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. there will be a service at the firehouse. Burial is at Nassau Knolls Cemetery, Port Washington.

The fire proved tragic, as well, for the families who were left without shelter last night. Building resident Rosemary Slavinsky said she was working at a nearby restaurant when her 18-year-old son John came running in, barefoot and shirtless, to tell her their apartment was on fire.

"We lost everything. We have no insurance," she said, sobbing as she looked at the building from across the street.

John Slavinsky said he was awakened by the smell of smoke and the sound of a smoke alarm. He ran out of his apartment and helped police evacuate his neighbors, he said.

"Thank God for the smoke detector," said his mother. "I just got it, too." She said she and her son planned to stay with friends last night.

A neighbor, Bobby Heimiller, said he was asleep when his mother "pulled me up and threw me out" of their apartment. Standing in a nearby flower shop where he and his parents had taken refuge, the 10-year-old cuddled his black cat, Puff, which was rescued by a firefighter.