

Extrication drill hones rescue skills

Event fosters camaraderie in memory of fallen firefighter Chuck Varese

By DAVID AMBRO

Extrication is not a tip-of-the-tongue word, but for motorists in a serious crash it's music to their ears.

The Northport Fire Department held its fifth annual Chuck Varese Extrication Tournament at the fire department fairgrounds on Steers Avenue Saturday, May 19. From a field of 24 teams from fire departments across Long Island, Commack Fire Department teams took first place in 9:30 and second place in 9:47 and the team from North Bellemore was third in 9:48.

"Those times are all right there," so it was a great event," said Northport Fire Department past Chief Robert "Beefy" Varese, who organizes the event each year in the name of his son, who was killed April 15, 2008 on his way to work on Route 25A in Northport by a driver on drugs.

It is a difficult competition, teams of firefighters in full uniform deploying hydraulic motors to operate powerful metal cutters and the Hurst tool, known to many as the Jaws of Life, to cut the doors off wrecked vehicles. They cut the doors off one side in the early rounds and both sides in the later rounds, and they are good at it.

While Mr. Varese marvels at how close the times are, he said that the event is more about training, camaraderie, and remembering Chuck than it is about winning or losing. "It's a labor of love," Mr. Varese said. "It promotes itself, and it is a lot of work, but I get a lot of help from a lot of people so I can do it blindfolded at this point."

"I do this for my son. The biggest thing for me is seeing everyone wearing a shirt with his name on it," Mr. Varese said. "This is something that he loved to do, so that is why we do it in his name... It is a day of sharing with Chuck. It is great to see everyone here."

Mr. Varese said that the added benefit of the event is that it makes the departments involved better at what they do. He said that extrication teams from local departments want to be competitive at the Northport tournament so they go to the Gershow Recycling yard in Huntington and practice on junked wrecks. "The more they practice, the better they get at this, and that's a good thing," he said. "Right now they're cutting up cars with no one in them, but at the scene of a real accident with people in the car if you don't know what you're doing somebody could get hurt. You have to know what you're doing, and these guys just keep getting better and better at it."

At the Northport tournament every year is Joseph Amato, of Firematic Supply in Yaphank, a company that supplies Hurst tools to local fire departments. Mr. Amato acts as a judge, timing the teams, deducting crucial time for mistakes, and when the clock stops, instructing teams about what they did well or what they could have done better.

"This event covers two things. camaraderie—it's a great time for



everyone to come out and support Beefy and recognize his son—and it also allows them to hone their skills," Mr. Amato said. "They come here and have some fun, they get a chance to train and hone their skills and that helps them serve the public better. It's great."

As he has since its inception, Steve Rossetti, Vice President of Special Projects for Gershow Recycling, attended the extrication drill Saturday to watch departments race against the clock and the critical eye of the judges to cut open wrecked cars. "We have participated in some way, shape or form for the past five years," Mr. Rossetti said.

This year Gershow donated 30 cars to the Chuck Varese drill, delivering them to the fairground in the days leading up to the event, and carting them away after firefighters have torn them apart. In addition to donating the cars, Gershow donates its Huntington yard and the cars there to local fire departments for extrication training.

"It makes them ready for the real life experience of pulling someone out of a vehicle. It is well worth it to us, and Gershow Recycling encourages its employees and associates to be involved in community events like this," Mr. Rossetti said. "We are very happy to do this."

FIRED UP: Joseph Amato (right kneeling), of Firematic Supply in Yaphank and a judge in the annual Chuck Varese Extrication Tournament in Northport, instructs a team of firefighters about how to attack a stubborn dashboard. More than two dozen teams from fire departments across Long Island participated in the event Saturday, May 19 at the Northport Fire Department fairgrounds on Steer's Avenue.

-David Ambro photos

