

# An Honorary Little Firefighter's Last Ride

by Ken Kilpatrick

*Excerpted in part from the lead story in the Thursday, August 11th edition of the Livonia Observer entitled "Firefighters honor 5-year-old 'little angel' with last wish". For more information and family photos of Leah, go to [www.leahsjourney.com](http://www.leahsjourney.com).*

When a firefighter dies in the line of duty, fellow firefighters pay their respects in a manner befitting a fallen soldier: with spit-and-polished pallbearers in their Class-A dress uniform best, the military-like solemnity of an honor guard standing at attention, a police-escorted funeral cortège, and a final, farewell run, high up on the rear deck of one of the fire company's showiest rigs. It is a rare distinction reserved exclusively for firefighters who perish while protecting the public. Not even retired firefighters are accorded such pomp.

Occasionally however, those hard and fast rules governing use of firefighting equipment and participation of uniformed firefighting personnel in off-duty details must be bent to accommodate special circumstances. Such was the case recently when our very own Deacon Alan (in his other capacity as Livonia's Fire Chief) granted a group of Livonia firefighters permission to fulfill the dying wish of a cancer-stricken little girl; five-year-old Livonia resident Leah Elisabeth James, who wanted nothing more than to have one more thrilling ride on a big, shiny red fire engine.

Seven months ago, Leah, who suffered from an inoperable brain tumor, made it known that she desired a ride on a fire truck. Children with her condition - known in medical jargon as diffused pontine brain stem glioma - have a survival rate of only 1-5%. When Livonia firefighters learned of her simple request - and heartrending plight - they arranged (per Chief Brandemihl) to take the appreciative youngster out to lunch at McDonald's.

Toward the end of July this year, Leah's condition worsened. She expressed a desire to reprise the lunch date she'd so enjoyed with her firefighter pals. Happy to oblige her once again, the



firemen put together a lunch for the little girl at their station on Monday, August 1st. But Leah never attended. She lapsed into a coma just before she was to have taken her second fire truck ride, succumbing two days later.

Grieved that the "little angel" who never ceased to charm those around her with a ready smile despite her grim prognosis, would now never have her last wish fulfilled, the firefighters who glumly watched their second lunch date with Leah evaporate decided that they could, after all, grant Leah's final request... posthumously.

Once again, authorization of the use of departmental apparatus and elective participation of firefighters came via the Chief, although this time it was with an overpowering sense of sadness that his permission was provided.

And so it was that on Monday, August 8th, the endearing little girl who loved fire trucks - who captured the hearts of Livonia firefighters - and who in death was lovingly conferred the title of "honorary firefighter" - was granted her final wish. Eight pallbearers from the Livonia Fire Department reverently placed Leah's diminutive casket up onto one of their rigs, transporting it from the funeral home to the church where her funeral mass was said, then on to the cemetery where she was interred. Police led the procession, driving ahead to make a traffic-free corridor for the fire truck. In a moving show of support, twenty other firefighters also took part, including a contingent that formed an honor guard for the proceedings.

Livonia firefighter Justin DiFiore, who drove the truck carrying Leah's casket, remarked of the occasion that it was "one of the hardest things I've ever experienced emotionally." Shadd Whitehead, training director at department headquarters, related that "Most of us were doing fine until the bagpipes started playing... then it really sank in. A few guys got pretty choked up at that point."

So, what do I extract from all of this? What message do I perceive coming from God out of such unimaginable sorrow and heartache?

- That the reason Jesus has a special place in His heart for children is because their unaffectedness, simple desires, and predilection for focusing on life's purest and most meaningful essentials, are a reflection of God's own character. Through Leah, we have been given a glimpse of God.
- That God alone is the arbiter of life and death, even though it causes us anguish and perplexity when He chooses to call home someone as undeserving to die as little Leah James.
- That edification is not solely a one-way conduit from old to young, but that even the smallest and least among us is capable of imparting life lessons, wisdom, and profound truths - as Leah demonstrated with her sanguine outlook even while living under a veritable death sentence.
- That the selflessness and compassion which typify the firefighting profession go far deeper than mere dedication to the job, but are qualities that steer every aspect of the lives of those called to be firefighters.

- That the priceless blessing of healthy offspring - even when our children try our patience and accelerate our acquisition of gray hair - is a bonus in an earthly existence that comes with no guarantees - a fact which highlights the importance of our trust in God.
- That even though we mortal beings are ill-equipped to assuage the overwhelming pangs of grief suffered by bereaved parents who have lost a child, the caring and consolation exemplified by the kindness Livonia firefighters extended to Leah, is, in effect, divine solace offered through human means, and an example for us to follow.

Fire trucks are undoubtedly verboten in heaven, but I like to think that little Leah is contentedly clambering over one now - a consolation gift from a heavenly "Chief" who bent the rules so His newest little angel/aspiring firewoman doesn't feel so bad about missing the second, and last, fire truck ride of her life.

Pray that God will minister in a very real and meaningful way to the mourning James family.

## Mountain Moving Faith

by Thomas W. Henderson

A small congregation in the foothills of the Great Smokies built a new sanctuary on a piece of land willed to them by a church member. Ten days before the new church was to open, the local building inspector informed the pastor that the parking lot was inadequate for the size of the building. Until the church doubled the size of the parking lot, they would not be able to use the new sanctuary.

Unfortunately, the church with its undersized lot had used every inch of their land except for the mountain against which it had been built. In order to build more parking spaces, they would have to move the mountain out of the back yard.

Undaunted, the pastor announced the next Sunday morning that he would meet that evening with all members who had "mountain moving faith." They would hold a prayer session asking God to remove the mountain from the back yard and to somehow provide enough money to have it paved and painted before the scheduled opening dedication service the following week.



At the appointed time, 24 of the congregation's 300 members assembled for prayer. They prayed for nearly three hours. At ten o'clock the pastor said the final "Amen." "We'll open next Sunday as scheduled," he assured everyone. "God has never let us down before, and I believe He will be faithful this time too."

The next morning as he was working in his study there came a loud knock at his door. When he called "come in," a rough looking construction foreman appeared, removing his hard hat as he entered. "Excuse me, Reverend, I'm from Acme Construction Company over in the next county. We're building a huge new shopping mall over there and we need some fill dirt. Would you be willing to sell us a chunk of that mountain behind the church? We'll pay you for the dirt we remove and pave all the exposed area free of charge, if we can have it right away. We can't do anything else until we get the dirt in and allow it to settle properly."

The little church was dedicated the next Sunday as originally planned and there were far more members with "mountain moving faith" on opening Sunday than there had been the previous week!

Would you have shown up for that prayer meeting?