



OUTSIDE THE Sheridan County firehouse in Hoxie, Steve Hirsch stopped to take a look.

— Hays Daily News photos by Steven Hausler

TRIAL BY FIRE

Attorney responds to trouble

By JAN KATZ ACKERMAN
The Hays Daily News

Steve Hirsch is nothing but professional when it comes to putting out fires.

As a lawyer, he extinguishes those proverbial fires that lead people to court. And as a firefighter trainer, he teaches others to put out real fires.

Since he was a year old, Hirsch has been around the trade of firefighting.

His father started the Mitchell, Cloud and Ottawa county fire district in 1963, and since then, Mr. Hirsch has gone on to become a firefighter and has served statewide in various capacities of firefighting.

"My philosophy in court has always been that the best thing is to keep people out of court because it's so costly.

"And with fighting fires, the more education we can do with the kids in schools, and the more we train ourselves and drive safely, well, it's kind of a cliché, but an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," Mr. Hirsch said.

Mr. Hirsch, who also serves as secretary of the Kansas State Firefighters Association and as editor of the Kansas Firewire newspaper, recently accepted the position of training officer for Sheridan County Fire District 1 based in Hoxie.

To help train the 95-member volunteer force, Mr. Hirsch drives from Oberlin to Hoxie every Monday

"These guys are really eager to learn. I've taught a lot of classes around the state, and they'll say, 'We can't get people to volunteer.'

"Here, probably once a month, someone walks through that door asking to volunteer," he said about Sheridan County residents eager to join the squad.

As a lawyer, Mr. Hirsch serves as Decatur County attorney as well as city attorney for Oberlin, Dresden, Jennings and Norcatour.

He was a special assistant for the attorney general's office in 1991 and was on the board of trustees for the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System from 1991 to 1993. A firefighter since 1987, Mr.

Hirsch has been a board member of the Kansas state Association of Fire Chiefs and is certified in field instruction, hazardous materials and tactical operations.

He is trained in first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation and prepared to fight fires from sources such as oil-tank storage batteries and grain elevators. He also is trained in incident management, fire-and-cause investigations, pump operations, salvage and overhaul operations, vehicle and farm extrication and defensive driving.

As a trainer, Mr. Hirsch trains firefighters not only in Sheridan County but across the state.

Sheridan County Fire Chief Ross Carder said he was pleased Mr. Hirsch agreed to come on board as trainer.

"I'm glad we've got him. He does an excellent job for us. He's been an instructor statewide and knows how to instruct," he said

Carder said Mr. Hirsch's professionalism had enhanced the quality of the fire department Sheridan County now has.

"He brings a different face, and that helps. After 12 years of doing this, they get tired of listening to me. Plus, he talks to and sees the mistakes of others and helps us not make those mistakes," Carder said.

Sheridan County Fire District 1 covers the entire county except Solomon, Prairie Dog and Bloomfield townships.

Mr. Hirsch said the job was a good one.

"I get to train firefighters, and that's what I've always wanted to do. That's the fun stuff," he said.

Mr. Hirsch is leading the volunteers in preparation for testing for the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress.

Mr. Hirsch said more and more fire departments are utilizing the skills of full-time fire trainers due to the high incidence of accident and deaths associated with the job.

"The more we train, the safer we are out in the field. I've been to five funerals, a couple of them in Kansas and three in Nebraska since I've been secretary of the Kansas association," he said.

Mr. Hirsch said the need for firefighters to be well-trained is ongoing. In the United States, about 100 firefighters die in the line of duty each year.

"You have to take the World Trade Center out of that number, but the leading cause of death in firefighters is heart attack, followed by accidents.



ATA TRAINING SESSION, Joseph Hirsch (above) hung out with his dad. He said he doesn't know if he wants to be a firefighter yet. Steve Hirsch (below) also serves as city attorney for four northwest Kansas towns and as Decatur County attorney.



"This is the only fire department that I've been affiliated with, and it comes from the top down, that the guys don't get in those trucks without that gear," he said about the low incidence of accidents among Sheridan County firefighters.

Mr. Hirsch said just like the New York City fire departments, the job tends to become one followed by one generation after another.

"Dad started the rural fire district in 1963, and I was born the year before. I grew up in the fire station. It's

kind of how the fire service works. It's a generational thing," he said.

Mr. Hirsch already has someone following in his footsteps. Ten-year-old son Joe accompanies Mr. Hirsch to training sessions at the fire house but he hasn't quite made up his mind if he'll one day join the force.

"Yes and no at the same time," he said about thinking about becoming a fireman like his dad.

Mr. Hirsch said being a lawyer and a firefighter allows him to participate in two different types of public service.

"As far as civil fires, I don't think you ever get those put out. But with the fire service, that's kind of like law enforcement.

"I'm kind of that up in Decatur County; I'm the right hand of the law enforcement. That's kind of a name they call us lawyers: social facilitators, versus the cops, who are social enforcers.

"With cops, the public doesn't want them coming around, but with firemen, they always want them."

This article appeared in *The Hays Daily News* on Sunday, Oct. 19 and is reprinted by permission.