

After more than 22 years of service, Lt. Alan Mitchell celebrates his retirement from Station 4 A-Shift.

Mitchell's journey into the fire service began in 1988, when a childhood friend working for Salem Fire Department inspired him to start volunteering. For years, he pursued his dream of becoming a career firefighter in Roanoke, gaining certifications and experience while building connections across the fire service community. At age 36, his persistence paid off when he was offered a position with Roanoke Fire-EMS. He joined Recruit Class #5, officially beginning the career he had long dreamed of.

On his very first day in company, Mitchell's volunteer experience came into play. Ladder 1 had just returned from a fire, and because he already knew how to drive a tiller truck, he was asked to take the wheel. "First day on the job and I was getting to drive the back of the ladder truck," he recalled with a smile, reflecting how quickly he was thrown into the work.

Over the next two decades, Mitchell worked at nearly every corner of the city. His official assignments included Old Station 1 Downtown, Old Station 3 at 6th and Rorrer, the new Station 1, Station 7, Station 8, and finally Station 4. Each house brought new experiences, but Station 3 known as 'The House of Fire' remained a favorite. The crew there, under Chief King, made a lasting impression. Mitchell explained that it didn't get much better than working under Chief King with that particular crew. He felt fortunate throughout his career, saying he had been blessed with great captains who shaped him into the fireman he is today.

Although he eventually promoted to lieutenant, Mitchell admitted he was always happy "riding backwards, just being a firefighter." Promotion was something his Captain encouraged him to pursue, and when he achieved it, it became one of the proudest moments of his career. The lieutenant's test, he explained, is one of the hardest promotions to achieve, with a large candidate pool and an intensive testing process.

As the years went on, Mitchell saw the department evolve. Roanoke's reputation for aggressive fire attack remained consistent, but EMS call volume continued to climb, highlighting the need for strong medical knowledge and skills. He often reminded newer firefighters to take every class they could early in their careers, because "later on, it will pay off."

The unpredictability of the work was one of its greatest challenges. No two calls were the same, Lt. Mitchell explained. A fire that looked like a simple room-and-contents one day could become something far different the next. The same was true for EMS, each call brought new and unexpected circumstances. One EMS call that stood out to him

involved helping deliver a baby in an apartment while his partner tended to a midwife who had suddenly collapsed. Tragically, the midwife later passed away, but the baby and mother were healthy. The experience reminded him of the duality of the job, “I’ve seen a lot of good and a lot of bad, even on the same call.”

Looking back, Mitchell said the fire service shaped him both professionally and personally. Being exposed to people on their best days and their worst gave him perspective, and he believes the job made him a better person. What he valued most, though, were the people he worked alongside. For him, the firehouse is family, and that is what he will miss most in retirement. “Everybody is treated like your family,” he reflected. “I was always working with good guys. I’m going to miss everyone.”

That sense of family wasn’t limited to the firehouse. At home, his wife, Cindy, and their children—Emma, who recently graduated from Radford University’s Nursing School, and Jesse, who is now 18—were always his foundation. He remembers balancing long shifts, medic school, and raising a young family, and says he could not have done it without their support. This October, he and Cindy will celebrate their 33rd wedding anniversary.

Even in retirement, Mitchell strives to stay connected. He values the tradition of gathering on a firefighter’s last day to share stories and memories, and he plans to return from time to time in a part-time role “just to keep up with everybody.”

When asked what legacy he hopes to leave, his answer was golden: “Treat everyone the way you want to be treated. Keep in mind that every call may be someone’s worst day, always strive to give your best.”

If given the chance to do it all over again, he said without hesitation “Absolutely, I absolutely would.” To anyone considering a career in the fire service, his advice was equally direct: “it’s a rewarding profession, and you won’t regret choosing it.”

As Lt. Alan Mitchell retires, his career leaves behind a story of perseverance, humility, and deep respect for the brotherhood and sisterhood of the fire service.

Roanoke Fire-EMS is deeply grateful for Lt. Mitchell’s more than two decades of service to the City of Roanoke. His steady leadership, his commitment to the community, and his kindness to those around him will not be forgotten. We congratulate him on a well-earned retirement and wish him joy, health, and many more memories with his family in the years ahead.

