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PAST FIRE CHIEF DENNIS ALLEN: "I cannot believe the number of people who have come out for me."

Former Evans Center fire chief gets new lungs and the gift of life

Community ready to celebrate hometown hero's return

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Charles Lewis/Buffalo News

Dennis Allen has returned to his Angola home, where a banner welcomed him back after he received two new lungs July 2 in the Cleveland Clinic.

Dennis Allen, former Evans Center fire chief, isn't accustomed to being on the rescuee side of a rescue.

At the start of summer, Allen's three-year battle with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis had stolen his ability to breathe. Rendered nearly immobile, Allen was hooked up to oxygen, receiving at least six liters every day.

The Angola native, a 37-year veteran of the volunteer fire service, was about to die.

Until July 2.

That day Allen received two new lungs in the Cleveland Clinic. He called Cleveland home until he returned Saturday to Angola for the first time since late June.

"I would rather be on the other side doing [emergency medicine], if it was up to me," Allen said.

“But, this is what was in the cards.”

Allen, who has tended to scores of accident and fire victims, and provided emergency aid at ground zero in the days following Sept. 11, 2001, will get a hero’s welcome.

A huge community celebration and fundraiser in his honor is set for Saturday, which, at Wednesday’s meeting, the Evans Town Board officially declared “Dennis Allen Day” throughout the town.

“It’s unbelievable,” said Allen, 54, the father of two sons. “I cannot believe the number of people who have come out for me. It’s mind-boggling.”

Tiger Schmittendorf, who is spearheading the Dennis Allen Project and Saturday’s benefit, wouldn’t have it any other way.

The event, according to Schmittendorf, Allen’s lifelong friend and Erie County’s deputy fire coordinator, is about giving something back to someone who has given so much of himself.

“I really think his character is a reflection of our community,” Schmittendorf said. “Dennis has spent his entire life caring for other people and our community is simply responding by taking care of one of its own. It’s payback time for Denny Allen.”

The importance of the emergency double lung transplant that saved Allen’s life can’t be measured, Schmittendorf said. The same can’t be said about his non-reimbursed medical and living expenses, which are estimated to be in the “tens of thousands of dollars.”

Allen, who was released from the hospital in mid-August, was placed in an in-house rehabilitation program at the Cleveland Clinic, where he underwent physical and occupational therapy. Following more tests last week, he returned home to recuperate.

“My recovery is going well,” Allen said. “I went from being on oxygen 24/7 and barely being able to move to now. . . . My [blood] oxygen saturation is 99 to 100 percent. Big difference.”

Pulmonary fibrosis, a fatal disease, scars the lungs, robbing its victims of the ability to breathe and the body of its ability to oxygenate the bloodstream. The same disease took the life of Allen’s 49-year-old brother, Dave, seven years ago.

Although the cause of the disease remains unknown, Allen said geneticists at Duke University are conducting tests to determine whether a rogue gene might have contributed to the malady in his family.

At this point, Allen said doctors have discounted his work at ground zero or his occupation as a firefighter as causes of the disease.

Allen, who joined the volunteer fire service in Evans in 1971, is believed to have responded to 10,000 emergencies as a firefighter and in his work in emergency medical services.

Nicknamed “Needles” by fellow firefighters for his ability to calmly insert an intravenous line under pressure, Allen responded to more than 350 emergencies in 2006 — the year after his diagnosis.

“Dennis is never one to shy away from tough situations or hard decisions. He’s always in the thick of it,” Schmittendorf said. “There’s no telling how many lives he has saved.”

Firefighting and helping people is Allen’s lifeblood. That’s why he plans a return to duty when his health allows.

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