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By Neil Steinberg staff writer
Photos by Scott Stewart

Engine 87 Fulfills A Burning Desire

Firefighters Restore Pumper Reminiscent Of Their Youth

The market for old, beat-up fire engines is not great. There's the scrap heap. And then there the handful of people, mostly firefighters, who love old fire engines. One of them is Ron Heckla. "I happened to be driving past a fire engine dealership in Alsip when I noticed they had a rig outside," said Heckla, an 18 year veteran of the Chicago Fire Department. "We thought we would restore it." The rig was a 1960 pumper. The "we" were Heckla and a group of his friends: Bobby Ruffalo and Dennis Alund, both Maywood firefighters; Lee Madison, who, like Heckla, works in the Chicago Fire Department's fire alarm office; Mike Mulcahy, A Villa Park firefighter, and Tom Gaertner and John Tierney, a Lieutenant and the chief, respectively, of the Broadview Fire Department. They decided to band together, forming the Engine 87 Club, and buy the old pumper. "We all liked the history of the Chicago Fire Department," Gaertner said. "We collected memorabilia and always wanted a rig". It was a big commitment, in both time and money. The seven split the \$2750. purchase price, then all contributed to the work and the \$11,000 or so it took to restore the truck.

"the wives were real supportive," Heckla said. "That helped a lot". The biggest problem was rust, along with cosmetic work to bring the rig up to Chicago Fire Department specifications. The men, all in their late 30's or early 40's, wanted a truck from the era when they were growing up and falling in love with firefighting. The 1960 pumper actually belonged to the Skokie Fire Department but was of the same sort used in Chicago. "we were trying to find something similar to what Chicago used back then, in the 1950's 1960's, but Chicago rigs are so hard to find, and when you do, they are usually so beat up, they're not worth restoring," said Gaertner. "Here we found something that was as close as we could get, then we got the original blueprints from Chicago rigs and worked on it till they matched up."

The Engine 87 Club, ("87" being a retired engine house number) takes the truck to parades and firefighter musters, as well as visiting firehouse for their centennials. "We try to spread goodwill with tis and turn back the clock to see where the Fire Department has been," said Heckla, who admitted that when driving the truck, which is fully operational and has a full compliment of hoses, the men wouldn't mind happening upon a fire and putting the rig to more than promotional work. We're hoping," he said.