

City of Newburgh

Press Release

83 Broadway, Newburgh, N.Y. 12550
(845) 569-7354 – (845) 569-7370

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Cheryle Branson Retires May 31

Twenty years ago, Cheryle Branson became the first female Code Enforcement Officer in the City of Newburgh, and later, one of the first women in New York State, (possibly *the* first), to earn certification in the field. But more important than being first is what you leave behind on your last day of work. On May 31, when she retires from the Code Compliance department, Cheryle leaves the community a better place because she was here.



(picture added 6/4/07) Cheryle Branson, the City of Newburgh's first female Code Enforcement Officer retired on May 31 after 20 years of service. At her May 31 retirement party, presentations were made by the City Council and City Manager and CSEA. (Left-right) Councilman George L. Bowles, Jr., City Manager Jean-Ann McGrane, Deputy Mayor Regina Angelo, Cheryle Branson, and Anna Marie Calli and Janette Frederick-Pierce of the CSEA.

“I think Cheryle is probably one of the most community-minded City employees I have ever known,” said Mayor Nicholas Valentine. “She not only worked here, she lives here. She always puts her heart into everything she does, but perhaps she gave even more to the job because this is her home.”

When Cheryle applied for the position, Code Compliance was under the direct supervision of the Fire Department. Cheryle was interviewed by the late Fire Chief, Robert Paden, and soon after, found herself the only woman in a department of 75 men.

Laughing, she said she took to the “paramilitary” environment of the department. “The members of the Fire Department supported me, encouraged me, and helped if I needed it,” she recalled. “They were total gentlemen and completely professional.”

Newburgh Fire Chief James Merritt, who has known Cheryle since his early days as a City firefighter said, “I will miss her professionalism and eagerness to help people. She should be very proud of her accomplishments. I am very glad she spent her career in the City of Newburgh. There are a lot of people who are a lot better off because she did.”

What made Cheryle apply for such a tough job? A search for a runaway once led her to an abandoned building on Liberty Street. Although the building was boarded up, the missing boy was inside with some other youngsters. Cheryle called the building inspector’s office to ask how this could happen. “I didn’t get much of an answer,” she said. “No one knew they were in there.”

Soon after, she saw the newspaper advertisement for Code Enforcement Officer, and decided to go for it. “I wanted a job where I could see positive results,” she said.

In those days, Newburgh was much rougher. Vacant buildings dominated much of the East End, and entire streets were controlled by gangs. Cheryle went out in the field with just a car and a 2-way radio. “I wasn’t afraid,” she said.

What made her stay? Cheryle credits the excellent training she received from the Newburgh Fire Department. She adopted a work ethic and never deviated from it. “I always treated everyone the same,” she said. “I’ve never followed politics, nor have I been influenced by who is richer or poorer.”

She added, “I was hired to do a job the right way, and I have done so since my first day.” The goal of the department is to get violations resolved, she said, and she strived to do so with telephone calls, rather than fines.

She drew inspiration from Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, who prayed “for patience and the spiritual strength to avoid cowardly solutions, falsity and insincerity in my work.” The words of Thomas Merton are on a yellowed newspaper clipping on one of the bulletin boards in Cheryle’s office, along with pertinent cartoons she has collected over

the years. Another bulletin board in the office is filled with thank-you letters. And she has boxes more at home.

The most important reason she stayed on the job for 20 years, Cheryle said, is “because the citizens of the City of Newburgh are some of the best people I have ever met. Ninety percent of those I have dealt with over the years are good honest hard working people. They are the salt of the earth.”

The high points of her career are almost too many to list. Helping to relocate a young mother living with 2 babies in a condemned building, and staying on the job long enough to see those children headed to college. Seeing both James Merritt and Eric Paolilli (who as a patrolman rescued her from a “situation” with contractors in the field) become Chiefs of their respective departments; and being honored by the New York State Building Officials conference for her 20 years of continuous service, are only a few.

On a personal level, Cheryle is very proud to have served as president of the Heights Association, and to have been instrumental in converting an abandoned burnt-out building into the Newburgh Heights Center, (currently the home of the City of Newburgh Department of Children, Youth & Family Services). She recruited more than 100 people to help with the initial cleanup of tons of garbage, and the ribbon-cutting of the new facility was one of her proudest moments.

What will she do in retirement? “Sit on my porch, read books, and plant flowers,” she said. “I’ll go into home mode.” The mother of three and grandmother of 8 will undoubtedly be spending some quality time with her family as well.

Cheryle has been on the job long enough to see two or three generations of Newburghers, and most of them know her on a first-name basis.

“I love this City,” she said. “People who move away often come back. That’s because Newburgh gets to you. Once you are in it, it gets under your skin.”