

Chamber backs first responders

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DURHAM —

When John White was approached with the idea of having a breakfast to honor first responders in Durham, he figured there was already an event catering to that group.

He was surprised to find out that there wasn't.

"No one else was anyone doing it," he said. White, the vice president for public policy at the Great Durham Chamber of Commerce, jumped at the chance for the chamber to hold the event – especially on a national day of remembrance.

"I could not resist any other day to hold this," he said.

Thus began the first First Responders Breakfast, which White hopes to make an annual event.

White said events like this have traditionally been put on by chambers of commerce because of their networking capabilities – it also worked in their favor that no one else in the community was offering such an event.

So the chamber reached out to 15 local law enforcement and safety agencies to put on the event. Each of those agencies had the opportunity to either nominate a department of the year or a hero of the year. White said six individuals will be honored as heroes and nine departments will be singled out.

During the process of organizing the event White said department heads sat down for a short interview about their agencies. One of the main questions asked was what success at the end of the day meant to them.

“We don’t stop to think about what these men and women do,” White said. “These men and women leave their families every single day.”

The first responders are out in the community every day, White said, and because of this they’re making connections not only to individuals but also to businesses. It’s also about the families of the men and women who put their lives out on the line to protect Durham and the surrounding communities.

“The chamber believes it’s important to not forget the responsibility that these men and women have, and ultimately what their families have signed up for,” White said.

Many first responders leave the house every day not knowing what the day will bring them, and that can put stress on family members. There’s a risk the first responders take when they step out the door, and that’s another reason why White and the Chamber decided to start the event.

It also helps that the business community and the network the chamber has built is behind the event.

“Everyone was very supportive,” White said. “We are pleased to say that this is sold out.”

Another special touch the event has is that every table purchased by a business or sponsor has 10 seats, and five of those seats are reserved for first responders attending the event.

“Overall the business community is behind this 100 percent,” White said. “The assumption was that other people (already sponsoring an event) ... We look forward to continuing it.”

The Chamber also took special note of what the departments would expect at an event, like the presentation of colors and singing of the National Anthem. Those were things that not all Chamber events have, but White said paying special attention to the values of the departments helps the authenticity of the event.

“This is 100 percent about (the first responders),” White said. “(We) put together the program to reflect their values.”

Even though today marks a day of national remembrance and reflection, White said hosting the breakfast this morning was a way to honor those that help the community, and the Chamber is working to keep the day a little upbeat as well by offering a “mini-billboard” as an award instead of the traditional plaques.

“(They’re something) fun, funky and cool that reflects Durham,” White said. “We wanted to make it a celebration.”

The breakfast is also a reminder that not one person can help the community.

“It’s not about any one person,” White said. “This is about every single person in uniformed service.”

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