

Firefighter finds reason to run

Raises funds for Burn Foundation

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Collinsville firefighter Mike Gafford was in the middle of the 33rd Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C., on Sunday when he saw the Pentagon and the images of 9/11 came flooding back.

"It was of what you saw of the plane crash," he said. "You kept replaying the pictures."

Gafford ran the 26.2-mile race to raise money for the International Association of Firefighters Burn Foundation, a charity that helps victims of fires and accidents.

Gafford, 34, found out about the race through his union, Collinsville Fire Fighters Local 2625, and started raising money for the cause, posting messages online.

"I hit up my friends," he said. "Some of them I haven't seen for years."

Eventually, he collected money from friends and family, all of which will go towards the Burn Foundation.

One of those he hit up for cash was fellow Collinsville firefighter and paramedic Mike Lutz, who also serves as the local union's treasurer. The department's staff pitched in to help Gafford, Lutz said.

"Most of firefighters donated money out of their own pockets," Lutz said. "Everybody was in support of this."

Gafford started training using techniques he picked up preparing for his previous marathons in Austin, Texas, Oklahoma City and Boston.

Last week, he traveled with other union firefighters from across the country to Washington. Gafford, a father of two, was the only one from Collinsville.

"Just me," he said.

The course took Gafford all over the nation's capital.

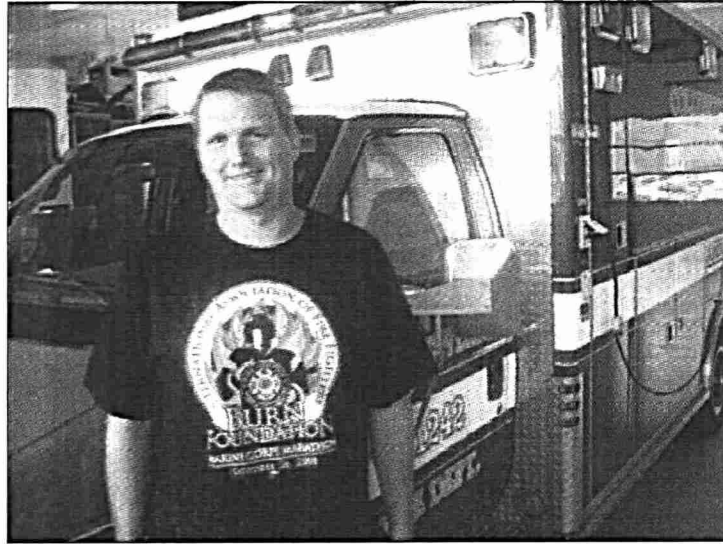
"You got to see some of the sights," he said. "It was neat."

All told, he collected \$2,116 for the Burn Foundation. About 25,000

runners participated in the race.

The experience, Lutz said, has caught the attention of other Fire Department staff.

"It's definitely raised awareness," he said. "We think it's great."



CHRIS COATES PHOTO

Collinsville firefighter Mike Gafford inside Collinsville Fire Station No. 1 on Thursday, a few days after finishing the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C.

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