

These boots were made for walking

By Glenn Bischoff

Sometime during Thanksgiving weekend in 2008, Lou Dempsey, a volunteer firefighter in Westin, Conn., received the telephone call that no one ever wants to get. He was informed that several members of his family had died from carbon monoxide poisoning while on a ski vacation in Aspen, Colo.

Grief is a powerful motivator. Dempsey channeled his grief into an ambitious endeavor, which was to launch a campaign to ensure that every residence in Westin was equipped with carbon monoxide detectors.

Ambitious? The plan would better be described as daunting, if not ludicrous. But as I wrote above, grief is a powerful motivator. The first step was to convince the town's selectmen to pass an ordinance that would require every home to have a working carbon monoxide detector. Dempsey did some research and found a law written in Charlotte, N.C., that he described as the "most comprehensive and buttoned up in the country." It was customized for Weston's purposes and the ordinance took effect in September of last year.

While that process was unfolding, Dempsey went about the task of developing a strategy for actually getting the detectors into the homes. He well understood that not everyone complies with such laws. He decided that the best approach would be to make the detectors available free of charge.

That of course spawned a new challenge. Where was the money going to come from? Dempsey's first inclination was to look towards China try to find a supplier of inexpensive detectors, but he quickly abandoned the idea of reliability concerns. "We wanted a reliable manufacturer who would stand behind the product in order to reduce the chance of liability exposure," Dempsey said.

So he made a few calls to U.S. manufacturers. That's when he caught a break. Kidde had a stack of detectors it recently had received from a warehouse retailer whose customers had returned them. Kidde assured Dempsey that the detectors were in good working order; in fact, they still were sealed in their original packaging. The company also was willing to strike a deal, and offered Dempsey the detectors at a very attractive price.

The price was so good that Dempsey snatched up 1,200 of them. A decision was made to make them available for a suggested donation of \$20. Even though 20 bucks doesn't sound like a lot of money, and even though it is well under the retail value of the detectors, Dempsey didn't want any barriers to adoption. He figured that no one would refuse the detector if the donation was voluntary. And at the price Kidde offered, the cash outlay would be covered even if a third of the recipients stiffed the department.

Now the challenge was to get them into the homes. But how? Dempsey decided a personalized letter-writing campaign was the way to go. Envelopes were hand-written and affixed with a stamp. "People don't respond to form letters," Dempsey said.

Apparently, they don't respond to personalized letters either. "The response was underwhelming. It was very discouraging," Dempsey said.

Remember though that grief is a powerful motivator. Unbowed, Dempsey went back to the drawing board. He mobilized the town's volunteer firefighters and divided them into teams. They set up at youth football and baseball games, at PTA meetings and even outside a polling place on Election Day. They also went door to door, helping residents set up the devices if that's what they wanted. (Dempsey had hoped to provide the kind of detectors that simply plugged into the wall, but cost considerations forced him to opt for a battery-powered model with a digital readout.)

Today, a little more than a year after the tragic deaths in Colorado, Dempsey believes that the town's residences are nearly 100% compliant with the carbon monoxide ordinance.

"I can't say for certain that they all are being used, but at least they have them," Dempsey said. "There's only so much you can do."

Lou, you've done enough.

Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, who led the daring bombing raid on Tokyo during World War II that was a turning point in the conflict, once said, "There is nothing stronger than the heart of a volunteer." After hearing Dempsey's story, I would humbly suggest that no volunteer is stronger than one whose heart has been broken.

What do you think? Tell us in the comment box below.