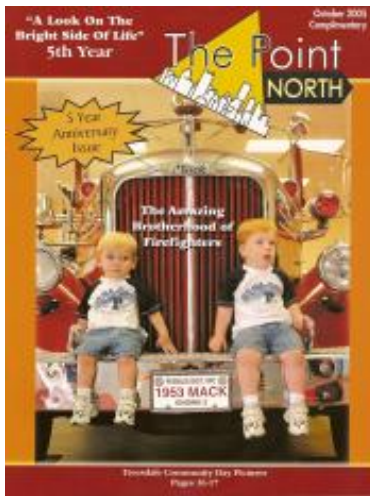




## The Amazing Brotherhood of Firefighters A Local Story

By Daniel Casciato



The nature of their work and the stress they endure almost on a daily basis brings firefighters together in a tight-knit brotherhood. Like most firefighters, the fire crew from the 52-member Station 188 on Peebles Road shares this special bond. Brian Hilliard has experienced the powerful bond of brotherhood that is shared among firefighters. It is through this brotherhood that they have become an extended family who look out for each other and help out in times of need.

Hilliard, a 14-year volunteer firefighter who's been with Station 188 for five years, and his wife Tracie became parents to twins, Brandon and Jacob on July 3, 2003. They also have a son, Evan who is eight years old. Brandon was a healthy baby, but his brother developed a condition known as hypoplastic left heart syndrome (HLHS.) "The left ventricle of his heart never developed," explains Tracie. "It's a rare condition and the worst congenital heart defect that a child can be born with. No one knows what causes it. It's just a freak thing that happens when the cell division

occurs." HLHS produces insufficient blood flow to the heart. The Hilliards discovered this condition after a 22-week sonogram revealed that Jacob would be born with half a heart.

The firefighters of Station 188 responded like it was their child. Knowing that Jacob would need as much care as possible to treat his condition and that the family had limited health insurance, they stepped in immediately. They raised funds by soliciting donations from other firefighters in the region. When Jacob was four days old, Fire Chief Robert Jeke of Station 188 organized a flea market which raised \$5,000. "Bob came up with this idea and ran with it," says Brian. "The support we received from him and the station has been fantastic. Words can't describe how I feel."

"We didn't hesitate to do this," says Jeke, a childhood friend of Tracie and neighbor of the Hilliards. "We wanted to help and raise money for them." Jeke (pronounced Jake) was the inspiration for Jacob's name. Jacob's middle name is Robert. "It was truly a great honor that they named Jacob after me," says Jeke.



It wasn't just Station 188 who pulled together. The Pittsburgh Metro FOOLS (Fraternal Order of Leatherheads) Chapter auctioned off an autographed Pittsburgh Steelers football two years ago.

"It's amazing," says Brian. "Some of them didn't even know Jacob and still donated money through the auction." This past July, the Hilliards organized another benefit flea market and raised about \$10,000 to defer medical expenses for Jacob. A local organization added \$5,000.

While HLHS may not be entirely correctable, some parts of the

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