



SKOKIE

Couple in their 80s graduates from fire academy

'This is the closest I've come to Spider-Man'

By Grace Xue

When he was 6, Mort Feldberg was playing with matches near the drapes in his family's living room when they caught on fire. He panicked.

Fortunately, his parents were home and the fire station was right across the street. No damage was done, except to the scorched drapes.

A little over eight decades later, Feldberg broke the Village of Skokie's record and became the oldest graduate from the Citizens Fire Academy, an eight-week education program that exposes residents to the day-to-day life of a firefighter at the Skokie Fire Department. At 87, he is 52 years older than the maximum age to be a firefighter applicant.

"You've seen a firehouse, and you see the fire trucks all the time, but you don't really know anything about it," Feldberg said. "If you don't know anything about it, you want to go there."

He and his wife, Karen Feldberg, 81, decided to sign up together for last fall's program.

Firefighting, CPR, vehicle extrication

Last fall, 11 graduates, ages 22 to 87, completed the program with three aspiring to become future firefighters. Karen Feldberg was one of the two female participants.

The Feldbergs' careers before retirement had nothing to do with firefighting. They both graduated college with degrees in education. Mort then worked for an electronics equipment company that manufactured intercom systems, while Karen worked



Karen Feldberg, 81, center, uses tools to cut open a car windshield during Skokie's Citizen Fire Academy. Her husband Mort, 87, left, became the oldest person to graduate from the academy. Firefighter Chuck Degeneffe watches their progress.

in the special education field. They raised two sons and have two grandchildren and two great-grandsons.

Mort described the couple as having "a lot of curiosity."

Steve Feldberg, their eldest son, said the family often traveled to different parts of the country during summer vacations to experience new things.

One of Steve's earliest memories of his parents' exploration was learning to sail in South Carolina about 40 years ago, which ended with sending out a 12-year-old Steve for help because the couple capsized the boat in the middle of the pond.

Before the fire academy, Mort and Karen participated in the Skokie Citizens Police Academy and visited the Boeing factory to see workers building airplanes. Museums are also a favorite destination. Karen even went on a slaughterhouse tour to see how butchers process animals.

"I tell any older person to learn whatever they can, however they can," Mort said. "We like to do things that weren't usual in our lives."

Rappeling down a building

The Feldbergs said that before the fire academy started, they had no idea what it entailed. When a staff member put a mask over Mort's face and asked him to hold his breath for 30 seconds, Mort said he realized, "This may be more than I thought."

In the third week of the training, the instructor asked the students to rappel down three stories of a fire tower with a harness and a rope, a type of technical rescue in firefighting special operations.

For most participants, having trust in the ropes and overcoming fear of heights

are the toughest parts. But Mort's challenge started before he could perform this operation. He had to first climb over the stairwell handrails to be lowered down. Arthritis in his back made this especially difficult.

"I haven't climbed over a fence in 20 years," he said.

But once he managed to climb over and jump off the balcony, he realized, "This is fun."

"This is the closest I've ever come to Spider-Man," Mort said.

Steve said he initially thought his parents were just attending a classroom session to "meet some people and listen to some experiences," so he was very shocked when he saw the photo of Mort rappelling from the fire tower.

Fire inspector and program coordinator Timothy Taylor said he initially worried that he needed to alter the curriculum when he saw Mort's and Karen's ages.



Mort Feldberg, 87, rappels while taking Skokie's Citizens Fire Academy classes. He is the oldest graduate of the hands-on program for people who want to learn more about the fire department. **NANCY MARONEY PHOTOS**

"It turns out we didn't have to alter a thing," Taylor said. "They knocked it out of the park."

Christopher Vrshek,

captain of the Skokie Fire Prevention Bureau, said the program does not set an age

Turn to Graduate, Page 12

Advertise

1-2-3

it's that easy!

- ✓ Selling an item
- ✓ Hiring an employee
- ✓ Celebrating a loved one
- ✓ Announcing an event

1  Schedule

2  Layout

3  Review & Submit

**Self-Service Print and Online
Display and Classified Ads
See Your Options:**

Visit: placeanad.tribpub.com



Chicago Tribune

Hartford Courant

Daily Press

THE MORNING CALL

THE BALTIMORE SUN

The Virginian-Pilot

Orlando Sentinel

SunSentinel

NEWS

Graduate

from Page 6

restriction, aside from having to be 18 or older to join up.

"Tim never asked about physical health or limitations when we signed up for the class," Karen said. "He just always said, each week to everyone, 'Do what you can and we'll help you,' and that's exactly what happened."

On the last week of training, all students must fight a real fire as their "final exam."

Mort prepared by putting on his firefighting suit, face mask and air tank—a 97-pound load. He would need to bear this weight to climb stairs, go into a burning room enduring smoke, heat and fire, then use a hose to put out the fire and rescue dummy victims.

Mort finished all the tasks just like all the younger participants. And in the photos, it was impossible to even distinguish the 87-year-old among other class members under his baggy black firefighting suit with yellow stripes, a big black helmet, an air tank and a mask. He said they were all "drenched with sweat."

"It was fatiguing. Everybody came out perspiring," Mort said. "But the fact that I could do it was the proudest moment for me."

As for Karen, she showed no fear when being raised five stories up in a big basket during the seventh week of training. She proudly took videos and showed her family members how she was enjoying the night view of Chicago from that height.

"I applied to be the first teacher in space in 1986," she said. "This was only five stories up."

More than a red truck

When the Feldbergs learned how to conduct CPR and use the automated external defibrillator, how fire trucks prepare lumber in different sizes to rescue workers who are stuck in trenches, and how firefighting methods vary if buildings have chemicals, they realized firefighting is much more than "sprinkling with a hose."

"We are not just firefighters. We have specialties that we do beyond," Taylor said. "We train, train, train every day to keep up to date with all the technology changes."

Taylor plans to open a Fire Explorer program for teenagers from 14 to 18 to give the Skokie young generation a taste of what it's like to become a firefighter and help them make a career decision.

He said the fire department faces a talent shortage as fewer young people are considering jobs in the public service sector, because they are more attracted by the tech industry instead of a job that could endanger their lives.

"When I became a firefighter 40 years ago, you used to have 6,000 or 7,000 applicants for possibly a job," said Taylor. "Now if lucky, we may have 20."

He said he wished the citizens academy and the explorer program could let more people understand that the fire department is



Mort Feldberg, 87, is the oldest person to graduate from the Skokie Fire Department's Citizens Fire Academy. **NANCY MARONEY**

more than just a red fire truck and ambulance.

"Firefighters work 24-hour shifts. They eat, sleep and train with each other on a regular basis," said Taylor. "It's a second family. It's a good camaraderie."

Firefighting takeaways

The fire academy hasn't changed the Feldbergs' retired life much. Karen stays devoted to her recent interest — genealogy. Mort still enjoys, when the weather is warm, digging around the yard, growing plants, mowing lawns and trimming bushes. Occasionally, he plays some golf.

But often, they notice unsafe conditions.

Three nights after training to extract a patient from a car accident by cutting away the windshield with giant scissors and disassembling car doors with appropriate tools, the Feldbergs found a car blocking a fireplug next to their house, a position police might not notice driving past.

"I stared at it for a while and then I thought, 'Mort and I know how to take that car apart,'" Karen said. "If only I had the tools."

Mort's curiosity hasn't stopped him from exploring. He said his plan is to learn more about space, starting by investigating possible astronomy classes.

He was delighted when Taylor told him that he had broken Skokie's record as the eldest graduate of the fire academy. He looked at Taylor, 62, and Karen, and raised his arms, shaking his fists up and down with a smile.

"I win," he said.

Ziyue (Grace) Xue Clip

Note: see an IG video about Heytea opening on @latimesfood

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C-F9B65vKwx/?igsh=MWQ1ZGUxMzBkMA==>



See more works
on my portfolio
website

Los Angeles Times

China's trendiest tea store opens first L.A. location (yes, there's a line for Cheese Grape Boom)



International tea chain Heytea opened its first L.A. location on Friday in Beverly Hills. Founded in China in 2012, Heytea has more than 4,000 stores worldwide. (Grace Xue / Los Angeles Times)

By Grace Xue

July 31, 2024 3 AM PT

Share

At its opening Friday on North Rodeo Drive, a new Asian tea shop attracted the longest line in the area, outpacing nearby luxury stores such as Hermès, Louis Vuitton and Balenciaga. The queue stretched across the street to South Santa Monica Boulevard.

Heytea (喜茶 Xi Cha) is a global tea chain founded in 2012 in Guangdong, China, by Neo Nie, a then-19-year-old entrepreneur. The company launched its first West Coast location in Beverly Hills with a menu of milk tea and fruit tea, featuring signature drinks such as Supreme Brown Sugar Bobo Milk Tea, Coconut Mango Boom and Cheese Grape Boom.



Drinks ready to be picked up by customers at Heytea in Beverly Hills. (Grace Xue / Los Angeles Times)

Known as the creator of cheese tea — a tea beverage topped with cheese foam — Heytea has become one of the most popular boba and fruit tea brands in China. When it debuted branches in Beijing and Shanghai in 2017, customers waited three hours in line just to get a cup of cheese tea. Heytea also is known for its innovative fruit tea recipe that blends pure tea slushie with real fruit juice and pulp.

Heytea — which has been tagged in more than a million posts on Xiaohongshu, a Chinese platform similar to Instagram, and since expanding internationally has garnered more than 84,000 tagged posts on Instagram — now has over 4,000 stores worldwide, including locations in China, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.

The first U.S. Heytea store opened last summer on Broadway in New York City, followed by a second store in Flushing, N.Y.



Heytea staff members were kept busy making drinks on the Beverly Hills store's opening day. (Grace Xue / Los Angeles Times)

Yujia Gu, vice president of overseas strategy and franchise, said he believes the U.S. market for boba tea beverages “will be even bigger” than China’s, given the vibrant community of international students and young people embracing Asian pop culture. The next steps include opening locations in San Gabriel and Irvine, then expanding to other major West Coast cities and the Midwest.

“We are more than just boba tea,” Gu said. “Many boba places in the market use syrups, creamers and artificial ingredients. ... We use real fruit, real milk.”

Among its unique seasonal drink flavors is the Yumberry series, featuring Chinese bayberry, a native subtropical fruit of eastern Asia. The fruit resembles a spherical raspberry and offers a sweet, mildly sour taste.

For the Los Angeles opening, Heytea introduced a Beverly Hills store-exclusive drink called the California Sunset, a slushie made with green jasmine tea and infused with Sunkist orange juice and pulp.

“It’s our gift to the city of Los Angeles,” Gu said.



NBA All-Star player Paul George visited Heytea for a preopening drink tasting. (Skye Bing / Heytea)

Heytea sold about 2,000 cups on opening day. Through Aug. 1, it's offering a buy one, get one 50% off deal and limited L.A.-themed magnets.

Wesley An, 26, a staff member assisting with the customer line, was busy delivering ice water to waiting customers. An, a store supervisor from Heytea's Broadway location in New York, flew to L.A. to support the Beverly Hills opening. He hadn't expected the sun in L.A. to be so strong, and his arms and cheeks were red with sunburn in less than half a day.

“There are customers who already had four cups of iced water but are still willing to wait in line,” he says. “I’m very moved by how passionate people are about the opening.”



Heytea server Dino Li examines the packaging for a signature milk tea drink. (Grace Xue / Los Angeles Times)

While An and others provided iced water, one server distributed menus and another helped customers make selections by explaining and highlighting options, streamlining the ordering process. Most staff members are fluent in both Mandarin and English. Customers could track their order progress on an in-store LED screen or through the mobile app if they ordered online.

For a preopening tasting, Heytea invited influencers and food bloggers from Xiaohongshu, Instagram and TikTok, as well as NBA All-Star Paul George, who prepared a California Sunset during his visit.

Chen Fan, 25, a recent USC graduate, visited Heytea with a friend after seeing a post on Xiaohongshu. Having studied in the U.S. for six years, he said he is excited to see a famous boba chain opening in Los Angeles, offering a taste of home.

While waiting in line, Fan planned to order the Grape Boom, made with grape juice, green jasmine tea slushie, grape-flavored jelly and hand-peeled grapes at the bottom. According to Heytea's official website, more than 117 million cups of Grape Boom and Cheese Grape Boom were sold worldwide from 2021 to 2023, making the grape drinks the bestsellers.



Customers lined up for Heytea's fruity drinks at the new location on Rodeo Drive. (Grace Xue / Los Angeles Times)

Gu said that to meet the demands of the rising Gen-Z consumer group, Heytea has initiated many crossovers with fashion brands such as Fendi and Barbie and the video game Genshin Impact. Settling in Beverly Hills is also a strategic choice for drawing young consumers.

“We chose Beverly Hills to open our first store because it’s a very diverse and energetic area,” Gu said. “When people come to Rodeo Drive, they always find something new and fashionable, and we could be that kind of brand.”

Heytea, 479 N Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills, is open from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Sunday.



Heytea created a Beverly Hills store-exclusive drink California Sunset, a slushie made with green jasmine tea and infused with orange. (Wenhao Yu / Heytea)



Grace Xue



Grace Xue is a Features/Lifestyle intern at the Los Angeles Times. She is from Beijing, China, and will complete her master's degree at Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism in August 2024. She previously worked for the Mac Weekly and Star Tribune in Minnesota.



See more works
on my portfolio
website

Ziyue (Grace) Xue Clip

Link to story page:

<https://patch.com/illinois/skokie/skokie-pharmacists-stressed-under-high-workload-during-flu-season>

Business & Tech

Skokie Pharmacists Stressed Under High Workload During Flu Season

While CVS and Walgreens nationwide reported pharmacists walking off the job this week, local employees are working even harder.

[Patch](#) Illinois Patch, Patch Staff

Posted Fri, Nov 3, 2023 at 9:38 am CT



Skokie resident Chanchira Jira getting a flu shot from Shelley Wax at the Skokie Health and Human Services clinic. (Photo courtesy of Richard Cahan)

By GRACE XUE, Medill School of Journalism

SKOKIE, IL — The Skokie pharmacist took her first phone call one morning last week scarcely before the drugstore opened at 9 a.m. No soon as she finished, two more came in and patients started to line up at the vaccine and drug pick-up windows.

“Thank you for calling CVS. I’ll put you on hold. There’re three people in front of you,” she said, holding the phone between her ear and shoulder while typing prescription information on a desktop.

This was just a typical morning for her in the past few weeks.

With flu season unofficially underway, pharmacies in Skokie have been overloaded with patients seeking vaccines and prescription orders. Pharmacists have worked long shifts and juggled flu shots and COVID-19 vaccines with daily jobs such as testing, filling prescriptions, and mental health counseling. Nationwide, inadequate staffing and increasing work requirements also resulted in pharmacy workers calling in sick, [affecting pharmacies in Illinois](#), according to The New York Times.

Interested in local real estate?
Subscribe to Patch's new newsletter to be the first to know about open houses, new listings and more.

Your email address

[Subscribe](#)

Patch reported earlier this week that [none of the three Walgreens pharmacies](#) nationwide that had saw pharmacists walk off the job were in Illinois, a company spokesman told Patch.

To ease the pressure on local pharmacies, the Skokie Health and Human Services Department issued 1,328 flu vaccinations at their clinic, about 34 percent more than last year. This year, the village also administered more than 640 senior high-dose flu shots upon pressing demands from senior residents.

But pharmacists are still burning out.

“I don’t know how to say [it]. The workload is just very heavy,” a pharmacist at a Skokie CVS said. “Like today, I’m working all day from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.”



Pharmacist Traia Al Rabi working at Super Care Pharmacy in Skokie. (Grace Xue/MEDILL)

At a Walgreens on Oakton Street, pharmacist Diala Saro also said there's been a big increase in her workload over the past five weeks. Of the two pharmacists at this Walgreens location, Saro is the only certified immunizer to vaccinate people.

Saro said she has had about 70-80 vaccine appointments daily over the past four weeks, which is two shots every 15 minutes not including walk-ins.

Some patients, especially seniors, were frustrated by local pharmacies' limited capacity and availability.

Victoria Westbrook said she tried to get a Moderna COVID-19 shot at her local CVS in Wilmette, but it only offered the Pfizer vaccine. So, she came to Skokie CVS but walked out in frustration.

"When I looked online, there were 15 spots open this afternoon, but the pharmacist just told me she doesn't have any openings," Westbrook said. "I don't understand what the discrepancy is, and this is my third attempt today to get a vaccine. I'm 67 years old and I want to have good protection."

Saro recommended that patients make appointments before their visit to speed up the vaccine process and minimize scheduling conflicts.

"People are used to just walking into a pharmacy and expecting to get a vaccine," she said. "We would take them as much as we can but because of the flu season and the new COVID-19 vaccine and the RSV vaccine, there's an overload."

Compared to chain pharmacies, independent drugstores received less traffic and can handle more walk-ins.

Traia Al Rabi, a post-graduate intern at Skokie's Super Care Pharmacy, said she gave out about 10 vaccines per day over the last month, and 70 percent of them were flu shots.

Rabi said she noticed many kids are getting meningitis and Tdap vaccines over the past few weeks.

Skokie's public health nurse Jennifer Davis-Spells said the sudden increase in these two vaccinations was probably because of the Oct. 15 exclusion date, the deadline for students to submit their immunization records to schools per Illinois State Board of Education health requirements.

She also said September and October are "extremely busy months" for the Skokie Health and Human Service Department.

"Typically, there is an increase in respiratory diseases such as the flu and RSV during the fall season," Davis-Spells said. "The seasonal flu vaccine is shipped to providers in September and HH provides several large community flu clinics for Skokie residents annually in October."

Michael Charley, the director of Health and Human Services, said the HHS also takes home appointment requests from residents who can't attend public clinics or are home-bound.

"The CDC recommends everyone six months and older get an annual flu vaccine," he said. "Every year, flu vaccination prevents illnesses, medical visits, hospitalizations, and deaths. Getting vaccinated isn't just about self-protection, it's also about protecting those who can't and are not vaccinated."

Grace Xue is a student at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism and an occasional contributor to Patch.com

Get more local news delivered straight to your inbox. [Sign up for free Patch newsletters and alerts.](#)