

Mike Specca
28 November 2006

Mark Stephenson Profile Baldwin Borough Superintendent of Public Works

It's a weekday morning in Baldwin Borough, and an overnight storm has left two or three inches of snow on the ground. School kids everywhere are waking up and turning on the local news, praying to see "Baldwin-Whitehall School District – Closed" flash across the bottom of the screen.

But their prayers go unanswered. The schools are open, thanks in no small part to Mark Stephenson, Baldwin Borough's superintendent of public works. He was up at 4 a.m. coordinating a team of five to 10 dump and pickup trucks to salt and plow the 97 miles of Baldwin roads.

Clearing snowy roadways is just one of dozens of tasks that the superintendent of public works is expected to deal with throughout Baldwin. Somehow, Stephenson is able to stay on top of a serious and demanding position, while maintaining a laid back attitude.

How does he do it? What all is the superintendent of public works in charge of?

"I'm not answering any questions!" Stephenson said as the imposing 5-foot-10-inch, 235 pound man stood up waving his arms. For a few long moments his expression stayed serious. Finally, he cracked a half smile. "I'm just kidding, what can I do for you?"

It's easy to see how Stephenson is often misunderstood. "People think he's a really intimidating guy. I think it's funny. Most of them don't even get that he's just kidding. He's got a real dry, sarcastic sense of humor," his son, Greg Stephenson, said.

The superintendent admits that what the public works department is responsible for is somewhat daunting: roads, sanitary and storm sewers, borough parks, rodent control, vegetation control, road kill, building maintenance, grounds maintenance, street signs, road markings, swimming pool maintenance. "Just about anything in the borough that can come up, other than law enforcement," Stephenson said.

He spends part of his day in his office, taking calls and complaints from citizens. Today he has an overnight call from a woman whose sewage backed up into her basement while she was doing the laundry. Another call reported that a tree is down blocking a roadway. Now Stephenson must call some of his men to go deal with both calls.

From 1975 to 1996, Stephenson was one of those men, working in all facets of the public works department. In 1996, the superintendent retired. Stephenson was unanimously appointed to the position by the Baldwin Borough Council.

But that doesn't mean Stephenson spends his entire day behind a desk giving orders. He still goes out on the job to help his men when they come to a situation they don't know how to deal with.

And what about the snow plow?

It's not that Stephenson's goal was to become the superintendent. "It wasn't so much that I wanted to become superintendent. I was in line for the job, and all the other men wanted me to take it. It was a very hard decision, I thought a long time about it," Stephenson said.

In the end, Stephenson went with the wishes of his co-workers.

This doesn't come as too much of a surprise, considering what he described as his favorite part of his job. "Probably the best part of my job is the men that work under me. They're a great bunch of guys to have working for you," He said.

He leaned forward in his chair, folding his hands in front of him. In the process his sleeve pulls up a few inches, inadvertently exposing a small tattoo on his forearm just above the wrist consisting of four hearts in a row, two blue and two red. Each heart symbolizes one of his four children, two girls and two boys.

If there's a best part of the job, there has to be a worst. For Stephenson the worst comes when a resident is in a situation where he can't help. "I do everything I can, but just can't help them."

Stephenson experienced this during the storms brought through the area after Hurricane Ivan two years ago. Stephenson and his men were called to houses with 7-8 feet of water flooded in the basement. He could bring them clean drinking water, and help clean-up, but he couldn't give back everything destroyed by the flood waters.

"You can just see the agony they're going through," he said.