

# 'Deep gratification'

City's first female fire chief has 'best job in the world'



*Editor's note: You magazine recently asked the community to nominate local women for its Women Who Inspire feature.*

*The response was overwhelming, and we received almost 30 nominations. Stevens Point Fire Chief Tracey Kujawa, as well as the nine women featured on the following pages, were selected for this feature based on their involvement in the community. Please read on to find out more about these inspirational women.*

**T**racey Kujawa, 49, of Plover says children, and even some adults, are surprised when they learn she is a member of the Stevens Point Fire Department.

Why the surprise? Because Kujawa, a 20-year member of the department, is a woman.

In fact, she was the first female firefighter/paramedic hired by the department and, in September, was named the department's first female fire chief. She also remains the only woman, with the exception of the administrative assistant to the chief, to be employed at the department in its nearly 120-year history.

Those are just some of the reasons Kujawa was nominated by both her husband, Jeff, and daughter, Kara Rortvedt, to be featured as one of the Women Who Inspire in this issue of You magazine.

Story by Jamie Jung | YOU magazine



Tracey Kujawa, chief of the Stevens Point Fire Department, speaks with fellow firefighter Joe Gemza during a Sept. 15 fire in Stevens Point. Opposite page: Kujawa is shown at the fire department. "I'm able to assist people in their deepest time of need. It brings some deep gratification to be able to help people, and people really do appreciate us coming to their aid," she said. (PHOTOS BY DOUG WOJCIK/FOR YOU MAGAZINE)

"My mother is an exceptional woman and is my hero," Rortvedt wrote in her nomination letter. "She is the most dedicated and courageous person I've ever met. ... Nothing has ever gotten in her way or deterred her from reaching her goals. ... No one can match her determination, courage and dedication."

Kujawa said while being the first woman to work for the fire department has presented its challenges, overall everyone has been very supportive.

"I thought it would be very difficult, and I was wrong," she said. "Once everybody there knew you could do the job competently, they were very helpful."

Kujawa, who grew up in Plover and graduated from Stevens Point Area Senior High in 1980, did not plan to become a firefighter. Instead, she attended Marquette University in Milwaukee on a running scholarship and planned to pursue a career in medicine. Part way through, she moved back to Plover and, in 1985, earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

While running on a treadmill one day, someone suggested Kujawa apply at the Stevens Point Fire Department. And that's how it all started. Kujawa took the necessary fire science and EMT courses, and then joined the department in 1992 as a firefighter/EMT.

"My plan never was to get into fire science," she said. "But once I got through the training courses, I knew this was something I wanted to do. Once I started, it was pretty instantaneous that I knew I

wanted to be here for a long time."

Kujawa said the best part of her job is the everyday challenges she faces, which test her abilities.

"I'm able to assist people in their deepest time of need," she said. "It brings some deep gratification to be able to help people, and people really do appreciate us coming to their aid."

"Being a firefighter/paramedic is the best job in the world."

Kujawa said while being a firefighter/paramedic takes quite a bit of strength and endurance, women shouldn't be discouraged from pursuing it as a career.

"I'm not saying women can't do it; they just need to work a little harder," she said. "If you truly feel this is something you want to pursue; don't give up on that dream."

In addition to her job responsibilities as fire chief, Kujawa also is the mother of three children — Rortvedt, 27, Joshua Kujawa, 29, and Garrett Kujawa, 22 — and grandmother to two, Jett, 7 months, and Alyssa, 4 months. She also has another grandchild on the way.

"Tracey Kujawa is someone with exceptional courage and strength who goes above and beyond what it takes to make life better for others," her husband wrote in his nomination letter. "Along the way, she has touched many lives. She always puts in the extra effort to make people's lives less painful, no matter what it takes. ... She believes the citizens of Portage County deserve the best system available, and she will do whatever it takes to get it done."



## BARB AUSTIN

**Age:** 43

**City:** Plover

**Family:** Husband Larry; daughter and son-in-law Cassie and Nate DeGroff of Plover; grandson Aiden, 2

**Career:** Extended care program supervisor for Aspirus VNA

**Community involvement:** Driver for Meals on Wheels; board member for Association of Downtown Businesses; delivers meals for the annual Community Thanksgiving Dinner; volunteers during annual Dozynki Harvest Fest and downtown holiday parade

**It's important to be involved in the community because ...** "I think we get back so much more than what we give. (Volunteering) gives you so much experience and confidence, and those are things you can't get on the job."

**Nominated by:** Carol Przybylski

**Nominated because ...** "(Barb) spearheads many fundraisers and quietly serves those in need without any fanfare. ... She does not have fancy degrees, but what she does have is an amazing work ethic and the ability not only to improve herself but everyone she comes in contact with."

*“You have to know what’s going on in your community. It’s my responsibility as a citizen to be involved in the community and to help where I can.”*

**LORI ZINDA**

**Age:** 47  
**City:** Plover  
**Family:** Husband Kevin; children Josh, 30, Lacey, 20, Krista, 17, and Tanner, 14  
**Career:** Educational assistant at Plover-Whiting Elementary School, and works with special needs children there  
**Community involvement:** Involved with PTO and as a volunteer at Plover-Whiting Elementary School; volunteers for pom and dance team at Stevens Point Area Senior High; formerly was a Girl Scouts leader  
**It’s important to be involved in the community because ...** “You have to know what’s going on in your community. It’s my responsibility as a citizen to be involved in the community and to help where I can.”  
**Nominated by:** Betsy Wiberg  
**Nominated because ...** “Lori was diagnosed with cancer over 10 years ago. Fighting against overwhelming odds would seem to be a tall order for most people — but then you have to know Lori. As she continues over 10 years of treatment, she: works full time, volunteered as a Girl Scout leader, president of PTO, coordinator for the SPASH pom team and looks over her own 90-year-old grandmother ... and somehow maintains a normal life. But the most amazing thing about my hero is that she never has complained about her disease.”



**PATTY CIESLEWICZ**

**Age:** 41  
**City:** Stevens Point  
**Family:** Daughters Tamara, 21, and Katherine, 19; son Nicholas, 17  
**Career:** Personal banker and marketing assistant for Community First Bank  
**Community involvement:** Volunteer wish granter for the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Wisconsin; involved as an usher, greeter and choir member at Celebration Church; takes part in community events sponsored by Community First Bank; has volunteered over the years with her children’s schools  
**It’s important to be involved in the community because ...** “Part of it has to do with instilling values and just helping your fellow neighbor. ... Especially being a mom, that’s what I want my kids to do and to carry it on to the next generation and the next and the next.”  
**Nominated by:** Tamara Erickson  
**Nominated because ...** “Patty is truly a person of strength, giving up her time and money to take care of the needs of others. She is a rare gem in the world today, involving herself in organizations that she is passionate about. In the future, I aspire to become half the woman she is.”



**MARG COKER-NELSON**

**Age:** 73  
**City:** Stevens Point  
**Family:** One son, five step-children and five grandchildren  
**Career:** Retired, was employed by Sentry Insurance for 26 years and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point before that  
**Community involvement:** Serves on the leadership group for the United Way of Portage County campaign; involved with the Family Crisis Center; on the board for Mid-State Technical College; on the Lincoln Center Advisory Board  
**It’s important to be involved in the community because ...** “Working with other people who share the same interests is an inspiration; it makes me feel good. (Volunteering) is the best of both worlds — to be able to help others and to get that good feeling that you get.”  
**Nominated by:** Bob and Marilyn Worth  
**Nominated because ...** “Marg Coker-Nelson is an inspiration to us because of her compassion and caring ways — not only for her friends, but for those in need. ... She does not seek personal recognition or look for fame. She gives from the goodness of her heart.”



**SUE HALL**

**Age:** 72  
**City:** Stevens Point  
**Family:** Husband Kent; daughter Sheri Hall of Racine; son Doug Hall of Everett, Wash.; two granddaughters, Jessica, 14, and Kaitlin, 11  
**Career:** Teaches at College Days for Kids and Women & Science Day at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point; travels around the country to teach for the American Chemical Society at national science teacher conventions  
**Community involvement:** Serves on the Stevens Point Parks Commission; involved with the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin; on the board of directors for the Aldo Leopold Audubon Society and the George W. Mead Wildlife Area; organizer for the annual Daffodil Days fundraiser for Portage County; co-facilitator for the Living with Cancer Support Group at Ministry Saint Michael’s Hospital; co-chair for the local Circle of Hope bracelet fundraiser  
**It’s important to be involved in the community because ...** “I think it’s important to get involved and give back. I’ve been given certain talents and abilities and gifts, and it’s important to give back and not just take.”  
**Nominated by:** Nancy Schultz  
**Nominated because ...** “Sue possesses that rare combination of warmth, charisma and magnetism that captivates anyone she happens to meet. Despite being a cancer survivor and having undergone quadruple bypass surgery, her verve and vigor put the Energizer Bunny to shame.”



## PAMELA JEWELL

**Age:** 60  
**City:** Amherst  
**Family:** Husband Peter Blenker; sons Jason, 35, Justin, 33, and Kristifer, 27; grandson Jesse, 2  
**Career:** Co-owner of Blenker Companies  
**Community involvement:** Vice president of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Foundation board; board member for the United Way of Portage County; past president of the Portage County Business Council and Golden Sands Home Builders Association; area vice president for the Wisconsin Builders Association  
**It's important to be involved in the community because ...** "I am a firm believer in pay it forward. It's a concept everybody should embrace. I was helped when I had nothing, by people who are no longer here. If I can pay it forward to someone else, that's what keeps the world moving."  
**Nominated by:** Jason Blenker  
**Nominated because ...** "I am continually amazed that (Pamela) has the drive, determination and time to devote to all of the activities. Her philosophy is not to belong to an organization, but to dive in with both feet and make it a better place than she found it."



## MELISSA THOMPSON

**Age:** 38  
**City:** Stevens Point  
**Family:** Husband Don; sons Dominic, 15, and Devin, 12  
**Career:** Co-owner of Red Mill Supper Club and accounting assistant for the Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin  
**Community involvement:** Immediate past chairwoman for the board of the Stevens Point Area Convention and Visitors Bureau; active in the Wisconsin Restaurant Association-River Valley Chapter; involved at Trinity Lutheran Church; has supported events to benefit Big Brothers Big Sisters, such as Taste of the Town  
**It's important to be involved in the community because ...** "It's very important to have connections and to have your name out there, and to let organizations know that if they need something like a gift certificate for an event, that you're available. And if you can't give gifts of money, you can give of your time and talents. ... You never know when you might need to be on the receiving end of that help."  
**Nominated by:** Don Thompson  
**Nominated because ...** "Melissa is a very talented and gifted person, from her many contributions in the community, to our business, to her work and to her family and friend. I have never known a woman who works harder and asks such little in return."



## JENNIFER YOUNG

**Age:** 44  
**City:** Stevens Point  
**Family:** Husband Charles; daughter Kate, 11  
**Career:** Works at Lensmire's Village Gardens during the gardening season  
**Community involvement:** Involved with the Portage County Master Gardeners; serves on the board for the Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin; co-chair of the Grant Scholarship Committee for the Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin; co-leader for daughter's Girl Scouts troop  
**It's important to be involved in the community because ...** "I feel like it's an obligation for me. I have been very lucky, and I have a lot of time and energy to give. ... Volunteers aren't born, volunteers are made. People have to see you volunteering, then it makes it easier for the next person to get involved."  
**Nominated by:** Judy and Dennis Surna  
**Nominated because ...** "Jennifer Young is an inspirational woman striving to make life better for her community. ... Like many busy women in our community, Jennifer always has time and energy for family and friends."

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*"If you don't have people who volunteer or help out in that capacity, then where is the community? If you don't have volunteers, you are missing a vital piece of the community."*

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## JUDITH KLUSSENDORF

**Age:** 57  
**City:** Stevens Point  
**Family:** Daughter Hanna Bruer, 27; son David Klussendorf, 22  
**Career:** Retired, was employed for 18 years with CAP Services  
**Community involvement:** Very active with the Alano Club in Stevens Point; offers alcohol and drug abuse counseling free of charge; formerly on the Advisory Committee for the United Way of Portage County; formerly involved with the Boys & Girls Club of Portage County and Stevens Point Area YMCA  
**It's important to be involved in the community because ...** "That's what makes a community. If you don't have people who volunteer or help out in that capacity, then where is the community? If you don't have volunteers, you are missing a vital piece of the community."  
**Nominated by:** Hanna Bruer  
**Nominated because ...** "Throughout her life, (Judith) has inspired many people and touched countless lives, all while maintaining a sense of sincere humility and modesty. ... She uses the knowledge and wisdom she has gained through her own experiences to help others in need with no expectations of recognition."