

The 2026 Caleb Benfield Challenge: Firefighting and Family

By ANGELA FARR KING

It has been said that parents never get over the loss of a child. They simply learn to live with the grief. Shelly Benfield, the mother of Caleb Benfield, said “It takes a village to raise a child, but it takes an even bigger village to bury one.” Shelly and her husband, Bob, lost their son, Caleb, on October 10, 2012, just after he turned 18. He was a member of the Bethlehem Fire Department and had just gone into his first live fire on October 1st.

Shelly said, “Caleb had been a Junior Firefighter, but had recently turned 18 in August of 2012, qualifying him as a Senior Firefighter. It was the first week in October so Caleb was busy preparing and teaching students from Bethlehem Elementary about Fire Prevention. Students from the elementary school had been bussed to the fire department and there were learning stations set up in the parking lot. Caleb had to run an errand home on his motorcycle and was killed on his way back to the fire department. It is suspected that someone ran him off the road. The spot where Caleb was killed can be seen from the fire department. The Bethlehem Fire Department crew responded to the accident, not knowing it was one of their own.”

A year later in 2013, the Benfields started the Caleb Benfield Challenge that is now held annually at the Bethlehem Fire Department. Shelly said, “I LOVE my fire department family. They have walked me through my darkest days and

this is just a tiny way to help build up the fire community and honestly any service organization, including fire, law enforcement, and EMS.” It is very clear that Shelly has a joyful passion for this project and that she and her family are all hands on deck for the event. This year, the Challenge took place June 21-27. Junior firefighters apply to be a part of it and Shelly said there is always a waiting list.

There were nine participants for this year’s Challenge, from Alexander, Catawba, and Wayne counties. They began on Sunday with an orientation to the program. This is not an ordinary Summer camp. Those in the program know it will be a week of hard work and long days, but they go into it knowing their firefighting skills will be increased tremendously. Shelly said that 95% of the senior firefighter instructors this year had been through the Challenge as junior firefighters before. This is a testament to the effectiveness of the program.

This is what a daily schedule looks like for these Junior Firefighters: 6-7 a.m. is physical training led by instructor Tyler Billington. This is followed by breakfast and work stations 7-9 a.m. that include truck checks and cleaning. Morning training sessions are held 9 a.m.-12 p.m., followed by a one hour lunch break. Afternoon training sessions are 1-4 p.m. Free time is 4-5 p.m. and dinner is 5-6 p.m. There are evening training sessions 6-10 p.m. Junior Firefighters are partnered with Senior Firefighters



LEARNING SKILLS — There were nine Junior Firefighters this year who participated in the Caleb Benfield Challenge at the Bethlehem Fire Department. They came from Alexander, Catawba, and Wayne counties. They spent a week of intense training and ran all medical and fire calls alongside Senior Firefighters. Pictured from left to right are: Liam Keel, Jacob Carson (on top of car), Aidan Morrissey, Noah Gwaltney, Jayden Garner, Gabriel Lindle (on top of car), Brody Berrong, Angel Moser, and Caleb Daniels.

and this year Shelly said there were leaders and trainers from Bethlehem, Concord, Central Alexander, Charlotte, Newton, and Conover fire departments. Shelly added that they had additional training instructors and speakers from the NC State Highway Patrol, the Alexander County Fire Marshal’s office, Alexander County EMS, the Alexander County Sheriff’s Office, Caldwell County EMS, the Stony Point Fire Department Ladies Auxiliary, Anchor-Richey EVS in Bethlehem, and the NC Forest Service.

Some of the topics covered during the week were forcible entry using a door prop borrowed from Conover Fire Department, Mayday training, which is teaching members how to call for

help in a situation that has become unsafe in a live fire, portable extinguisher training, firefighter down CPR, vehicle extrication, ladder training, the art of reading smoke using a prop called the Palmer’s Dollhouse built by Chief Ashley Starnes, and controlling the spread of a wildfire. Shelly said that a car was donated by Josh’s Towing to allow participants to practice how to safely remove a pinned individual from a wrecked vehicle by using hydraulic tools.

Shelly said that participants stayed/lived at the Bethlehem Fire Department for the entire week. They ran all medical and fire calls alongside Senior Firefighters, thus learning what it’s like to be a full-time paid firefighter.

She said a large portion of sponsorship for the program was provided by the NC Red Knights Chapter 25 based in Taylorsville, a motorcycle club for firefighters. They provided some financial support and a meal for the graduation ceremony on Saturday.

Benfield also thanked the following businesses and organizations for their donations of time, money, and supplies for the event: PJ’s Restaurant in Bethlehem, Fresh Market Produce Hickory, Mays Meats in Taylorsville, the Stony Point Fire Department Ladies Auxiliary, the Magic Cool Bus Food Truck, Lowe’s Foods in Bethlehem, and Anchor Richey EVS in Bethlehem.

Mrs. Benfield added that Chief Ashley Starnes was adamant about adding a service project to the Challenge a few years ago. This year, the Junior Firefighters participated in an event hosted by Homepage | CAST for Kids Foundation, which has a chapter in Bethlehem. This is an organization that “enriches the lives of children with special needs through fishing,” according to their website. Benfield said the Challenge participants spent time setting up tables, chairs, and tents for the CAST for Kids participants. They then helped the kids by checking their life jackets and assisting them onto the fishing boats. She said it was a special time for the kids as well as the Junior Firefighter participants. There were lots of “high-fives” and smiles from everyone.

Each year, the Challenge participants do a small “research” project and present their studies on Saturday to their families during the graduation ceremony. This year, they researched famous historical fires and how those fires impacted the fire service, what was learned from the fires, and how the future fire service changed because of what was learned

from these events.

It is always an action-packed week, and an educational one, too, but it’s so much more than that. It’s about family and community and teaching these young people to give back and to be a part of something so much bigger than themselves. It’s also become quite the family affair for the Benfields. The lead instructor for the event is Joshua Benfield, Caleb’s younger brother. He is a Captain at the Lovelady Fire Department in Burke County and a member of their Special Operations Team. He was only 13 when Caleb died. Shelly’s daughter-in-law, who is a manager at Dillard’s in the mall, took a week off to cook for the event. She was in charge of all of the meals, which took an army of firefighters’ wives and other volunteers to prepare. She is married to Daniel, Caleb’s brother, who was 17 when Caleb died. Benfield’s daughter, Anna, is a charge nurse at the Catawba Emergency Room, but is a former Bethlehem firefighter. She helps with blood pressure checks and registration during the week. Shelly’s parents cook a meal every year and drive it over from Wilkes County and her sisters provide financially so the Benfields can buy snacks for the participants.

Shelly and Bob give so much thanks to the Bethlehem Fire Department for hosting this event every year because they know it would not be possible without their support. Even after the tragedy their family has suffered, Shelly is able to say, “God has been so good to me.” This is surely an example of Romans 8:28 in action, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”

For more information, follow the Caleb Benfield Challenge on Facebook or contact Joshua Benfield at 828-238-8056.



THE CHALLENGE — The annual Caleb Benfield Challenge was held from June 21-27 this year at the Bethlehem Fire Department. Nine Junior Firefighters spent a week filled with intense training and mentoring from Senior Firefighters. Caleb Benfield (inset) was a Bethlehem firefighter who was killed in 2012 in a motorcycle accident when he was just 18 years old and his parents started this Challenge in 2013 as a way of giving back to the fire department that Caleb loved and where he served. The lead instructor for the event (pictured here) was Caleb’s brother, Joshua, who is a Captain at the Lovelady Fire Department in Burke County and a member of their Special Operations Team.



HELPING CHILDREN — As part of the Caleb Challenge at the Bethlehem Fire Department this year, Junior Firefighters participated in a service project with a Bethlehem Chapter of the CAST for Kids Foundation. They helped set up tables, chairs, and tents. They also secured lifejackets and helped participants into the boats. Pictured here is Junior Firefighter Liam Keel assisting a CAST for Kids participant with her lifejacket.

Star deadline is August 6
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