

# Water tower down: Icon's demise breaks ex-Chrysler worker's link to past



By Mary Delach Leonard, Beacon staff

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The  
end

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came without fanfare for the familiar blue and white water tower that had stood watch over the old Chrysler plant in Fenton through good times and bad: The icon was felled on a hot Saturday afternoon — and then hauled away like so much unwanted scrap.

Chris Paplanus, 54, who worked for Chrysler for 26 years, read about the Aug. 6 demolition on a Facebook page where former plant workers stay in touch, share personal news and job tips — and plan reunion gatherings.

"Well that's the end of it then," wrote one poster, responding to a photo

link chronicling the deed. "Nothing remains. No evidence of the thousands of jobs and millions of cars built on that site."

Paplanus had a similar reaction when he visited the former plant site a week later.

"It was our tower," he said. "Our statement to the world: We may be gone, but we are not defeated. We shall persevere."

Paplanus was one of more than 3,000 St. Louis autoworkers still working at Fenton in 2008 when Chrysler announced that it would shut down the Dodge Caravan minivan operation — the south assembly plant — and cut production of Dodge Ram trucks at the north plant. The entire facility was shuttered for good in July 2009.

Two years later, little remains of the two factories that once loomed large on the 295-acre site, now for sale. The Capstone Advisory Group, which is handling the liquidation of Chrysler properties nationwide, opted to raze the south plant last year and is completing demolition of the north plant.

But even as these behemoth assembly plants were themselves disassembled, the water tower had stood its ground. Tall. Proud. A reminder that St. Louis autoworkers once toiled here — and had done so since 1959 — making a solid middle-class living while working on the line. They were members of the United Auto Workers, earning about \$28 an hour, with benefits, when the plant closed.

Losing their jobs at Chrysler was a life-altering event for workers who thought they were set for life, said Paplanus.

"There were other people like me — probably 90 percent of the people there — who said, 'When I hired in here, it was with the expectation that I'm going to retire from here. And I'll have a job for life, and then I can retire and I'll have money.' Well, that was out the window," he said.

Paplanus said he knows that plant workers weren't the only ones to suffer; the closing sent ripples throughout the region's economy, impacting ancillary manufacturing plants and small business owners and school districts in neighboring communities.

"It devastated a lot of people, not only Chrysler workers," he said.

Still, Paplanus said he wasn't prepared for his own emotional reaction as he viewed the vast, empty acreage, now missing its landmark sentinel. The tower's demolition sent a message of finality that squashed any inkling of hope that Chrysler could some day return.

"It's the end of Chrysler in Fenton," he said. "The tower's gone, there's nothing left. It won't be coming back."

## MAKING HIS 'RETIREMENT' WORK

Technically, Paplanus is a Chrysler retiree who accepted an early retirement package when he left the company in spring 2009. But like so many 50something Americans who were laid off or took buyouts and early retirement packages from downsizing companies during the recession, Paplanus is years away from Social Security and working as hard as ever, maybe harder, to maintain his middle-class lifestyle.

According to the [Urban Institute](#), the unemployment rate for older Americans soared in 2009, one of the worst years for American workers since the Great Depression. In a year that saw a loss of 4.7 million nonfarm jobs, the average monthly number of unemployed American workers aged 55 to 64 was 1.5 million, double the number in 2007.

Now in his third year of not making Dodges, Paplanus spends summer evenings and weekends calling balls and strikes, safes and outs at the Chesterfield Valley Athletic Complex or at Wapelhorst Park in St. Charles.

He loves this job — getting paid to watch baseball and softball and working with kids. It's something he started doing while still employed at Chrysler.

In 2007 and 2009, he umped during two marathon games played in St. Louis that set Guinness Book of World Records and raised money for local charities. Earlier this



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Chris Paplanus high-fives the team

summer, he worked the world series of the American Amateur Baseball Youth Alliance held in Chesterfield

June 16, 2011 after umpiring during a girls softball game at the Chesterfield Athletic Association.

where local baseball greats coached teams, including Albert Pujols of the Cardinals and Ryan Howard of the Phillies.

"Everything you need to know about business, you can learn as an umpire," Paplanus said, thoughtfully. "You learn that there are rules. You learn that rules can be adapted. You learn how to negotiate. You learn how to operate under pressure when somebody's yelling at you, and you still have to keep your cool. You learn the art of making an instantaneous, correct, confident decision and convincing people that it's the right decision without saying, 'Hey I'm right.' "

Since Chrysler closed, Paplanus has become more reliant on the field of dreams to help him pay his bills. He earns \$38 a game, the top scale, and might work three games in an evening. During the peak of the season, Paplanus estimates that he works 40 hours a week umping.

It is his second job.

Most weekday evenings, Paplanus dons his uniform and heads to the ballyard after completing his shift at Wainwright Industries in St. Peters, a family-run business where he reworks parts and assemblies for GM.

Paplanus, who has worked at Wainwright since March, said he likes both the work and his co-workers, though the pay — \$9 an hour — is one-third of what he made at Chrysler.

"I went in with the expectation that these guys are making \$9 an hour, I bet they aren't really motivated to work," he said. "And I got in there, and these guys work just as hard as anybody I've ever worked with at Chrysler."

## **BETTER OFF THAN OTHERS**

Paplanus said Chrysler gave him three options when the plant closed: Take a buyout, accept reassignment to another Chrysler plant — in Detroit, Kokomo, Ind., or Belvidere, Ill. — or, because he was over 50, he could take early retirement and begin earning a monthly pension, with medical

benefits.

"At the time Chrysler was in bankruptcy and there was no guarantee that it was going to be solvent," he said. "A buyout was out of the question because it's basically, after taxes, here's \$70,000. Go away. And then what are you going to do after that? Going to Kokomo, Belvidere or Detroit — pulling up my roots, moving all the way out there and then taking the chance that six months later Chrysler would go under — didn't make a lot of sense to me."

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Paplanus said he clears about \$2,100 a month from his pension, after deductions. He realizes that puts him in a far better place than younger displaced Chrysler workers who have exhausted their unemployment benefits but still can't find work.

"I have it better off than a lot of the guys, but that doesn't mean that I have it great," he said. "The guys who don't have a pension don't have the income that I have. But that doesn't mean that I'm rich."

He may be retired, but not working is not an option for Paplanus. His monthly pension does not cover his monthly bills.

Four years ago, Paplanus and his wife moved from Manchester to a pretty two-story house in O'Fallon that he believed he could afford. He is determined to keep his house, despite his \$1,600 monthly mortgage.

"I consider my home my safe haven, and I don't want to lose that," he said. "Also, foreclosure is not an option. I don't believe in backing out of a commitment. The word mortgage means, in Latin, 'until death.' I take that responsibility seriously."

Should the housing market turn around, Paplanus said he might consider selling his home, but it is not a possibility now.

Instead, he works as much as he can, making hay while the summer sun shines and before baseball season ends. Long workdays that start around 6 a.m. at the factory and don't end after 10:30 p.m. on a ball field. Sleep for four or five hours, and then get up and do it all over again.



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Former Chrysler worker Chris Paplanus visits the site of the old plant on Aug. 12, 2011.

## **DOWNSIZING THE AMERICAN DREAM**

Paplanus said he had long considered retiring from Chrysler after 30 years, but he always intended to keep working afterward. It was a prospect that he thought was possible because he had continued to learn and broaden his experiences, while working at the factory.

During his 26 years at Chrysler, Paplanus was an assembler, repairman,

inspector, internal auditor and team leader. And he also took advantage of education benefits: Chrysler paid for the master's in business administration he earned from Fontbonne University in 2006, taking classes at night after work.

"People would say, "Why are you going for a master's if you're working on an assembly line? Well, there's two reasons: You never know. You can never have too much education. The other thing is, why not? If you can learn something that's not going to cost you, why would you not do it?" he said.

When the plant closed, Paplanus thought his MBA would help him get a new job, but he says he has found something of the opposite in the current down economy — he is often told that he is "overqualified."

"In this environment right now I think the human resources departments have it completely backward," he said. "They say, 'I don't want to hire somebody who is overqualified because they're just going to leave and go someplace else. I don't want to spend all this money on training and then they leave.' A better way to look at it is 'I'm getting a person with an MBA for \$10 an hour; how great is that going to look on my bottom line? And if he stays I'll look like a genius.' "

After leaving Chrysler, Paplanus found temporary jobs at several local companies, but it hasn't been easy, he says, and he has faced increasing financial pressures. He still has expectations for his retirement years, but they are lower now.

"My American dream is to be successful. To be happy and to be productive. Those three things. Now, how I attain that has completely changed," he said. "Originally, it was, 'I am going to work at Chrysler for 30 years. I'm going to earn good money. I'm going to put money away for my retirement. I'm going to retire with my happy family and play golf everyday.' I think that's everybody's American dream, but there aren't very many people earning under \$200,000 a year that are going to see that happen."

But he adds, "If your expectation as you get older is to have people who love you and have good friends and feel that you have done your best and that you have options, then I think I'm on track for that."

*Next: [A survival plan after Chrysler.](#)*

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