

SFX: intro music

Narrator:

D: Hello this is Deanna Alexander,

K: and Kavita Mistry.

D: Our latest project at school is documentary. At first we came to a complete blank on an interesting topic. After listening to some of the other topics, I came up with the idea of Firefighters.

K: We thought this was a great idea because not very many people really knows what goes on inside of a firehouse, or are close friends with a firefighter. While thinking and brainstorming more and more about the topic we thought of more thought provoking questions, such as...

D: I know to be a firefighter you have to be tough and strong, but what are the main components in being a firefighter?

K: Are firefighters always fighting fires? What does a day in the life of a firefighter actually look like?

D: Since firefighters have to deal with extreme situations everyday, I would expect they'd always be depressed, but I wonder, what type of atmosphere does a fire station actually has?

K: And the biggest question for us was where are we going to find some firefighters to interview. Deanna's best idea was to start a fire, because then we could get some good photos too.

D: No, I didn't say that, but that does sound like fun. Maybe next time.

K: Okay so I was just kidding, but lucky for us, Deanna happens to be very close family friends with her neighbor, Toby McDonell. And Toby just happens to be a fire fighter for the Palo Alto Fire Department.

D: Actually, Toby has been a firefighter for 24 years. And in 1990 he was hired for the city of Palo Alto has now worked there for seventeen years. Here's a quick story to show Toby's dedication:

Toby: And when I was hired I actually had to wait in line for two days and two nights. We had to camp out because they only accepted the first 250 applications for the position so there was a big line on Stanford campus. We just camped out in a parking lot and then I was number one in line and they hired 11 of us at the time.

Narrator: K: There's a lot that goes into firefighting, here's Toby again, explaining the biggest aspect in being a fire fighter. Teamwork.

Toby: Fighter fighting is probably 99% teamwork because we're all attached to the fire engine, wherever the fire engine goes, we go. So if we go to inspect businesses all of us go. If we go to the store to get food, we all go. Everything we do ultimately as a team you know on calls we all work together at a fire, on a medical call. The only time its not teamwork as much is if the captain is doing the report because they're responsible for that so it's a single person thing. But again almost everything is teamwork 'cause we always work together and even if there's people that don't, because the fire department is like a giant family and there are people that don't get along, people that do, so, even if there are personalities that don't get along on a call everyone pulls together and does what they need to do and they accomplish everything and they put aside their differences so that's a good thing.

Narrator: Even for simple tasks, the firefighters will stick together.

Toby: We work a 24-hour shift so we begin at 8 in the morning and we're there until 8 in the morning the next day. So we get there in the morning, we all check out the fire engine all the equipment, make sure everything is there and we've got all our medical supplies, and air in our air bottles, make sure everything works. Then we all clean the station. And then we inspect all the businesses in town, we do fire safety inspections. We do that everyday. We have training in classes we go to quite often, usually every, at least once a week. So we're either on drills, or we're at a class, or we are inspecting businesses, or we also have online computer training that we do. So basically we are all attached together everyday, everywhere we go.

Narrator K: Our next interviewee is Mike. He's worked over ten years as a paid firefighter, six years of which he was a paramedic, and two years before that as an intern. The day we spoke with him he was filling in for another fireman on B-shift. Each shift is 24 hours. In a way, the long hours can bring the firefighters closer to each other than their own families.

Mike: Because we spent so many hours together, 24 at a time, sometimes 72 if you work overtime and all that, so a lot of us spend more times with each other than we do with our own wives. I go on vacations with my wife so I can spend five weeks together with her no problem. But a lot of guys here, they spend more time with the guys here than they do with their own wife at home or their own kids so you definitely develop that family type atmosphere where you pretty much know each other inside and out, when their having a bad day and bad mood and when to stay away from them or when to joke with them more.

Narrator D: That kind of sounds like every summer, because I leave for camp about a week after schools out, and then I don't really see my parents for the rest of the summer, but I become really close with people at camp and my friends.

K: Well for firefighters, their family bond builds a stronger team on calls to emergency situations because they know each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Mike: Like Jason probably knows if we go on a critical call how I'm going to react on that call and how Toby is going to react on that call 'cause we've worked together for so many years. You know the people that are good at one certain thing and maybe not so good at another and that's why teamwork is important. After spending so many years of working with somebody, you realize that they're stronger maybe in one area than another and where to plug them in on the call. Like Jason's on the rescue so he know extrication really well so definitely he'd be the one operating the actual tool if we got on the car where as me as a paramedic, I'd be involved in patient care. So you kind of split up your duties like that. Him being a captain, he'd be in charge of knowing everybody's strengths and weaknesses and where to plug them in on calls and that kind of stuff.

Narrator: In teamwork, it's crucial to know the people you work with and also to have a variety people with different strengths. In emergencies, there could be a need for many different kinds of people. Ed is firefighter that's been with the Palo Alto Fire Department for many years, and even has family within the department. He shares a story about the variety of jobs required on a call after a major car accident.

Ed: Speaking in regards to team work on the job team work involving an accident we had, you have, we had several patients in the car and it took 2 engine companies, and

a rescue and a truck and two medic vans to take care of these two patients. It involved a lot of extrication, a lot of teamwork in that extrication, the medics were inside the car with the two individuals giving them first aid and performing whatever they needed to do inside the vehicle. And the rest of us outside the vehicle were taking it apart so we could get them out. And then there was a group outside of that ring of people working in the car, assisting by bringing equipment and whatever was needed whatever someone needed. People from the outside brought it in. And then passed the equipment in, and then people worked. And that's teamwork, the team working to get two people out of a car and save their lives.

Narrator: The need for teamwork at a fire station is not only for emergency situations. They work together in all aspects of the job. Doug has been a firefighter paramedic with the PAFD for almost two years and worked as an EMT there for about a year and a half.

Doug: Just like when you are at home you have your chores, we all have our chores here. But its not one person's responsibility, it's everybody. We all clean the toilets and the showers. Maybe if you are more junior like I am you clean more toilets, or more showers. You have the least desirable jobs but everybody is working. For example, Ed's cooking tonight, and although he hasn't asked for help, we each take turns cooking.

SFX: toilet flush

Narrator: With all these firefighters cooking and cleaning, you might mistake the firehouse for a regular home. In this way, the firefighters are like a family which gives the firehouse a very family-like environment. But like any house on any street, each station has it's own atmosphere.

Toby: The smaller stations are definitely a calmer, quieter environment 'cause at a smaller station there's three people. Cause we have three people on a fire engine, three people on a ladder truck, three people on a rescue truck, two people on the ambulances. So a smaller station just has one engine so there's three people so there's a much mellower environment. But we do have fun, we tease each other. But in the bigger stations where there's 8 or 9 people its definitely a lot crazier. It's more like the movies because someone is always doing something to somebody else. There's always practical jokes going on.

SFX: laughing and story telling

Doug: Also the other night we set up a, our paddleball court. Which is great. We had a, we work as a team out there, it brings us closer as a team, and as a family. Just like you would with your relatives, or your brothers and sisters at home.

SFX: ball, or paddle, and tennis

Narrator: Firefighting is of course not only fun and games. There come times when they go on very serious calls, and the situation can get ugly. There may be people or young infants that don't survive a situation or patients rushed to the nearest hospital with their lives hanging in the balance. These situations can begin to take a toll on the firefighters, so they come together and help each other out. Randy Fisher has been a fire fighter for 24 years and shares his experience in association with the CISD, Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, team.

Randy: one of things that we do is, as a group of people, we get training on handling stress specifically and how you deal with that throughout your career. And its hard to see people suffer and go through painful events and sometimes we go through

very traumatic calls: death of young people, children, severe accidents... Don't want this to be too much of a downer but one of the things that it's the reality of what we do on an everyday basis and why sometimes we use humor and laugh is to relieve some of that stress. We exercise. one of the other things that we do is we come together as a group after specifically an event that stands out might be a death of a child, let's say a SIDS death (sudden infant death syndrome), which is probably one of the toughest calls we go on. We'd come together usually at a fire station, within an hour or two hours, when we can get the crew back together. And we sit around and I might be the facilitator or one of the other team members might be a facilitator in the room and we open it up, we get some information about the call, we let the people know the outcome of the call was. And- we can give an update to all the crew members on what happened at the call, what the outcome is, how the person is doing.

Narrator: It's hard for a fire fighter because on a call they might need to rush a victim to the hospital and leave them in the hands of hospital staff, so then there's no more contact with that person, and if it wasn't for the CISD team, a firefighter may never know what ever happened to that victim.

Randy: often times we'll go out on a call, we'll take care of the individual, we'll package them up, we'll put them on the ambulance, we'll get them to the hospital, and this happens obviously very quickly. And then we release them to the nurses and doctors and then we back off after we've given them our information and sometimes it still bothers us. It's hard to let go. So we want to know now 'how did we do?' 'How'd that person fare?'

Narrator: Coming together in CISD meetings is a way for firefighters to understand what may have happened in the chaos of a call and it could help them find answers to lingering questions. It also gives everyone a chance to share their own experiences from the call. Like a family, they can be open with one another.

Randy: So we'll come together as a group and we'll just start from the first people who were on scene, each person kind of just says where they were, what they did, what they saw, how they felt. It helps us to get the emotion out. I can learn something from another individual that I might not have known happened at the event. Something might have bothered me that bothered other people. Particularly it might have been response of the family members, how tough it would be. Maybe we'd share that because we have children ourselves that it would be really hard for us to see, someone might have had a child that age. So its really tough and it can be an emotionally charged event, but what we try to do is come through that and kind of as a group we understand that this is a normal process, these things happen, that's why do what we do, we do the best we can, accidents do happen, we try to make the outcome to the best of our ability and the benefit of the patient.

Narrator: Recently, Toby McDonell joined the CISD meetings. Here's Toby talking about the effect it has on him when there's a firefighter injury, and how the CSD meetings help.

Toby: Another example of a call was a young girl who basically stopped breathing, and her heart stopped which is something we call full arrest. So we were doing CPR on this young girl and her mother and father are there, and they are screaming for her, and they are crying, and looking at us. They are reaching out for the girl, and a parents worst nightmare is to lose a child. And we are in there, and the girl did not

survive, but not only did we experience the sadness of the loss of the girl, but seeing the pain and the look in the parents' eyes. And realizing what they are going through, I mean it was very very difficult. And that call haunts us, and always haunts us, but the CISD makes it not as bad it lowers the level of pain or sadness you feel. Because you talk about it, and get those feelings out.

Narrator:

D: So what does it mean to be a crew of firefighters? It means to always work together to conquer any task. It means to always be there for someone else and knowing they've got your back too. It means to understand each other emotionally, especially in hard times. But above all, it means to be a family.

K: It's difficult to describe what it means to be a firefighter because there almost never will be a lone firefighter at work. Instead, they work as one team, one unit, one crew of firefighters.

K+D: Thank you to all of the Palo Alto Fire Department. Especially: Toby McDonell, Doug Slezak, Ed Aguilar, Mike Espland, Randy Fisher, Norm Park and Randie Revilla and all the other firefighters.

K: This is Kavita Mistry,

D: And, Deanna Alexander.

K: Thank you for listening.

SFX: music out