

# Fire Family

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How would you describe what it means to be a firefighter? Does it mean to wear the uniform? Does it mean to drive the fire truck with the sirens blaring, rushing to the next fire?

How would you describe the atmosphere of a fire station? Being a firefighter is not a job to be taken lightly. They sometimes respond to situations with somber outcomes and innocent victims. Does that make the station like a serious and solemn stronghold of bravery and heroism?

With all these questions, we started to look for some answers, which only led to a larger question: Where would we find firefighters to interview? Deanna's best idea was to start a fire, because then we could get some good photos too.

Okay so we were 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.

Actually, Toby has been a firefighter for 24 years. And in 1990 he was hired for the city of Palo Alto, and has now worked there for seventeen years. He has been a dedicated firefighter before he even got the job, "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 I was number one in line and they hired 11 of us at that time." <sup>2</sup>

We all know that firefighters don't save kittens from tall trees all day. They respond to a large variety of calls; they are on the scene at fires, medical emergencies, traffic accidents, hazardous material spills and more. Our topic of research digs beneath

the side of fire fighting we hear about on our television sets or what we catch a glimpse of while rubbernecking at a highway accident scene. There is a whole other side to being a firefighter that many people don't know about unless they share a close relationship with a firefighter. Through the experiences they have in common, the firefighters share a bond with each other that you won't find at any workplace. For a firefighter, the crew is a second family and the station is a second home.

This book follows a day in the life of a firefighter of the Palo Alto Fire Department. The schedule is fictional and based on real events, and interviews of firefighters working for the PAFD. All the cited facts are true.

The clock strikes 8:00 at Palo Alto Fire Department, Station 5. B-shift is happy to go home after a long shift at the fire station. As C-shift enters one-by-one, a call comes from the battalion chief informing the fire fighters that one of them is going to have to work an extra 24-hour shift, because the missing C-shift fire fighter has just called in sick with the flu.

Since his family is on vacation without him, fire fighter Toby McDonell is more than happy to get some overtime. Toby will be the engineer for C-shift. He begins the shift by moving his clothing and bed sheets back from his car and into his dorm. Even though he has to work for longer than normal, he's excited about working with the two firefighters on C-shift because he has not really spent time with them since the Pirate Party roughly a month ago.

It is breakfast time in the firehouse and the firefighters gather around the round table together to start the day right. The welcoming scent of coffee drifts from the

kitchen. Toby pulls out a carton of milk labeled with his name from the fridge. Everyone shares their food with each other or brings their own breakfast. They enjoy their meal in peace because only about 5% of their calls are around breakfast time. <sup>1</sup>

Most of breakfast is eaten in silence; the only interruption is for stories of bad traffic, and summaries of the prior day's and evening's activities. "The smaller stations are definitely a calmer, quieter environment because at a smaller station there are three people. But we do have fun; we tease each other. But in the bigger stations where there are eight or nine people it's definitely a lot crazier. It's more like the movies because someone is always doing something to somebody else. There's always a practical joke going on," explains Toby. <sup>2</sup>

The environment of a fire station depends on its size, but they all have one thing in common: Each and every station is like a home to a family of firefighters because their time and experiences bring them close together.

After breakfast, the table is spotless because the firefighters work as a team to clean up after themselves. With the table cleared and dishes washed, the captain reviews the day's schedule.

"We have to clean the station, and complete the equipment and truck check. We can go grocery shopping some time around 10:00, which leaves us enough time to get in a decent workout and shower. Then sometime after lunch, we can do two fire inspections. Oh, and Toby you are cooking tonight, right? Well, if you need help just let us know. So, let's start cleaning the station. I will clean the showers, and vacuum, Toby, you can

empty the trashcans and wipe the counters in the kitchen, and Gordon, you can clean the toilets, and other bathroom stuff.”

Toby retrieves a sponge and liquid soap from the cupboard and promptly begins to wipe down the counters, first with soap, and then with water. Using a folded kitchen towel, he glides his arm across the counter tops in an attempt to dry them. While returning the cleaning materials, he grabs a box of trashcan liners. Starting at the far end of the station in the dorms, Toby works his way through the bathrooms, the living room, and the office removing the trash from the bins and re-lining the trashcans when needed. After removing the last bit of trash from the kitchen, he goes out the sliding glass door into the parking lot to place the waste in the dumpster. Next, Toby goes to complete his part of the morning inspection.

Air brakes: *check*; lights: *check*; horn: *check*. Since Toby is the engineer, he is responsible for everything on the truck, to be specific, anything that does not disconnect from the truck. Gordon, being the fire fighter on this shift, is in charge of the equipment that is removable from the truck.

On a call, the crew relies on the fact that the fire engine and all their gear is in top working condition. How chaotic would it be if they found themselves faced with a critical emergency and on the way, they are forced to sluggishly maneuver through traffic due to a dysfunctional siren? In 2006, the Palo Alto Fire Department responded to 5652 incidents. That breaks down to about 15 calls a day, and for that, they need working equipment. Of those 5652 calls, 3434 of them were medical aid. That comes out to be about 60% of all the calls they receive.<sup>1</sup> So, for a majority of their calls, there are people

with injuries, some fatal, and they rely on firefighters to come to rescue with equipment that has been checked and in good condition.

Toby McDonell explains that it is a group effort to complete their check. “We all check out the fire engine, all the equipment, make sure everything is there and we’ve got all our medical supplies, air in our air bottles, and make sure everything works.”<sup>2</sup> Equipment and engine checks are done during every shift the next morning to ensure working equipment during that shift.

Toby will circle around the truck checking the gauges, water level/pressure, air brakes, lights (interior and exterior), siren, and horn. Each and every aspect of the inspection is marked on a special form to insure that if any problems arise they can fix it immediately. Gordon, his co-worker, does his part by checking the air tanks, batteries, and other various pieces of equipment. Having checked everything meticulously, the crew can move on with their schedule- time to work out to stay in shape.

Now wearing tennis shoes, tube socks, and matching PAFD t-shirt and shorts, Toby searches the station for Randie. He finds her wearing the same exact clothes, lacing up her left shoe in the office. Together they travel into the garage where the workout area is set-up. After turning on the television for some background noise, they begin chatting, and stretching. After a couple of minutes, they move onto some of the exercise machines, Toby on the treadmill, and Randie on the elliptical. At the end of 45 minutes, they are moist from the sweat while working out. They turn off the television and go their separate ways towards their showers. Being a firefighter includes many physically rigorous activities requiring one to be healthy and fit.

Next on the agenda for the fire fighters at station 5 is a trip to the grocery store to buy dinner, and maybe lunch too. They all pile into the truck; Toby will drive, Randie will sit shotgun and Gordon in the back left seat.

Upon reaching the store, Toby parks the truck around the corner in the nearest parking lot. Since there must always be a person with the truck when there is no emergency or an inspection occurring, Gordon is left behind. While walking towards the store, Toby and Randie divide the list of items and agree to meet back at the cashier once everything has been collected.

Toby, with his shopping list in hand, makes his way to the vegetable area. First, he collects some asparagus, and then moves on to grab some broccoli for lunch. As he selects and bags the appropriate amount of broccoli, there is a call on the walkie-talkie. Although people nearby cannot decipher the dispatcher, Toby quickly recognizes that there is an emergency. He leaves the shopping cart and strides quickly back to the truck. As he exits the store, he looks over his shoulder to see Randie coming from between aisle headed towards the exit as well.

Once again, the fire fighters load-up into the truck. Immediately, Toby turns on the lights and sirens. He expertly maneuvers towards the street. Quickly, but cautiously he crosses the intersection and drives in the opposite direction of the stopped traffic. A few minutes later, the fire fighters have arrived on scene. They are greeted by a disgruntled old man signaling to them in which direction the emergency is.

They follow the man up a flight of stairs where there is a small group of people gathered. A younger woman steps forward and begins describing the situation. The firefighters hook the old woman, who is feeling weak, up to a heart monitor, and give her

oxygen from the tank. Another distant set of sirens can be heard heading toward their location; it is an ambulance with paramedics. Within a few minutes, the firefighters are working as a team to get the lady down the stairs and into the ambulance for transportation to the hospital. With Toby on one side of the stair chair, a paramedic on the other, and Gordon guiding from above, they successfully reach the ground. Working together, while Randie and the other paramedic compare notes and discuss the situation, Toby, Gordon, and the paramedic lift the lady from the chair to the stretcher and into the ambulance.

The ambulance leaves, and the fire fighters load up their equipment into the truck and return to the grocery store. Although they have been gone for almost an hour, Toby finds his shopping cart right where he left it. After finishing collecting the necessary vegetables, he finds two boxes of corn bread mix, a can of crushed pineapple bits, and chicken breasts for dinner that evening. His stomach begins to growl having not eaten since breakfast. His hunger motivates him to shop quickly so he may return to the station and enjoy his home-packed lunch.

While on his way to the cashier, he finds Randie, conveniently reaching for the last item on her list. Together they arrive at the cashier and pay for their items with their own money because the city does not pay for any of it.

At the store, Toby and Randie mostly purchased food for dinner, but they also got a bit more to add to their homemade lunch. In addition to the pizza he brought from home, Toby has a Gatorade and some fruit from the store. He unpacks the pizza from the foil setting it on a plate, using the microwave to heat it up. After washing the apples under some water, he proceeds to slice them, and set them on a clean plate.



Once lunch is ready, all the firefighters sit down together. They enjoy going over the details of the call, and enjoy telling each other humorous stories about their children. But as they enjoy their meal, they have to be prepared to spring into action if they receive another call.

Statistics show that the 12 o'clock hour receives more calls than any other hour of the day. From January 1, 2007 to April 4, 2007, the PAFD received 226 calls between 11:00 am and 1:00 pm. <sup>1</sup>

As usual, everyone chips in to clean up after lunch and then the team prepares to leave the station once again; this time they will complete two fire inspections. Cleverly, Captain Randie chooses to do inspections on two businesses less than a block apart and around the corner from Starbucks. While looking for an appropriate place to park, they realize that the first business is not open, and quickly decide to come back another day to inspect it.

After finding the second business, they find an empty lot in which the fire truck could easily fit. Toby pulls the truck into the lot, and parks. Carefully they cross the street and enter the veterinarian office. Randie introduces everyone to the secretaries who then retrieve the doctor/owner from his office. After introductions are exchanged, the crew begins their inspection. Toby wanders through checking the fire sprinklers, and emergency exits. Randie and Gordon discuss the new emergency lights and the policies on fire extinguisher renewals. After a thorough inspection, the veterinarian receives a pass on his fire inspection. The fire fighters exit through the side door, but before heading back to the firehouse, the crew makes one quick stop.

At the Starbucks around the corner there's a request for a "non-fat, half-calf, venti, iced, toffee nut latte with whip- and don't forget the sprinkles." That is Toby ordering his favorite drink when the crew stops at Starbucks on the way back to the station for a quick and much needed coffee run. His co-firefighters order a tall black coffee and a grande, low fat, mocha frappachino- no whip. With their caffeine in hand, they head back to the station.

With all the time they spend with each other on their long 24 hour shifts, the firefighters begin to know each other as well as they know their own families. In some cases, "A lot of guys [at the station] spend more time with the guys here than they do with their own wife at home or their own kids. You pretty much know each other inside and out, when they're having a bad day and bad mood and when to stay away from them," shares firefighter Mike Espland.<sup>3</sup>

The personal bonds they form with one another come in handy on all their calls. Their family bond builds a stronger team on calls to emergency situations because they know each other's strengths and weaknesses. "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. 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."<sup>3</sup>

Being able to predict the reactions of other firefighters helps the situation run more smoothly. The firefighters can quickly distribute jobs based on their strengths and performance of certain tasks. On a serious call such as a major car collision, there can be

a large variety of jobs required to rescue trapped victims in a car. Firefighter Ed Aguilar recalls a similar situation, which required a large group of firefighters with varying talents to save two victims. “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 someone needed.”<sup>4</sup>

A call does not always end with a happily-ever-after fairytale ending. There are tougher calls when people or children don’t survive, and these situations can take a toll on the firefighters. After these serious calls many of the firefighters and other individuals that responded to the call with the engine company will gather at the firehouse for a meeting of the Critical Stress Debriefing (CSD) team.<sup>5</sup> The firefighters may use this meeting as a method of stress relief, a time to understand the chaotic events of a call, or an opportunity to share their reaction/experience during the call.

In the rush of a call, not everyone can know all the details of the situation. This could include the cause of the situation, the sequence of events, and the aftermath of events. The firefighters initially treated injured patients and then hand them off to hospital staff. Often times they won’t know the condition of those patients and how well they did in reacting to the situation.

The CSD meetings also allow firefighters to share their common reactions and different perspectives in the call. They may have lingering emotions they’d like to share. Being open with one another brings the firefighters closer together on an emotional level.

Six o'clock comes and the dinner chef steps into the kitchen to prepare the meal. Toby is the main chef and goes outside to fire up the grill. On the menu is a barbequed banquet accompanied by rice and homemade pineapple cornbread. Tonight there is a special guest: the battalion chief will be joining them for dinner. The "family" of firefighters gathers at the table for the last time of the day.

After a long day at the fire station, the crew is excited for some time to relax and reflect. Tonight they will be watching the Da Vinci Code, with ice cream sandwiches for dessert. Moving slowly towards their rooms, the fire fighters have always agreed that they'd rather not get a call in the middle of the night. Fortunately, they receive the least amount of calls during early morning hours.

The firefighters of C-shift are finally able to sleep for the whole night before the next shift rolls in at 8:00am to relieve them and another day begins at Palo Alto Fire Station 5.

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.

Every aspect of the job is evidence of how they are brought together and how they work as one. Glued together for 24 hours at a time, they share many experiences with one another.

The light atmosphere they create at the stations sets up the family environment. During free time at the station they share laughs and memories of great times. They can easily relate to one another. Sometimes they get to know each other better than their own

family members at home. Knowing each other inside and out creates an efficient team when breaking up the various tasks to be done in a day or on a call. Whether they're simply cleaning the station or saving lives the firefighters can quickly divide their responsibilities and back each other up. Their experiences from their calls and time spent in each other's company also tie them together emotionally.

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.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Fire Dispatch. FireDispatch.com Inc. 6 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.firedispatch.com/>>. Path: Reports.

<sup>2</sup> McDonell, Toby. Personal interview. Mar. 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Espland, Mike. Personal Interview. Mar. 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Aguilar, Ed. Personal Interview. Mar. 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Fisher, Randy. Personal Interview. Mar. 2007.