

## **Pride and Ownership: The Love for the Job**

### **THE FIREFIGHTER**

**By Rick Lasky**

What's amazing about the fire service is when you look around, you see about the widest variety of people imaginable. Young and old. Some with a lot of experience and some with very little experience. Some with different interests. Some into the fire side of it, some into the EMS side of it, some into the specialty areas, and some that are into to it all. But when *you* look at the fire service, what do *you* want to get out of it? Why'd *you* get into it? Whether you're a paid firefighter, volunteer, paid-on-call, or any combination, you obviously didn't get into it for the money. Everyone out there realizes that you're not going to get rich being a firefighter. That's why we all have side jobs. You got into it for something that money couldn't buy you. You got into it to save lives and protect property. To help people. To make a difference. To be a part of a team that was second to none. Most of you can remember wanting to do this from the time you were little. I know I did as my son does now. I can remember hiding under my dad's turnout coat on the back seat of the car only to scare the you know what out of him when he got to the fire. Then he didn't know whether to leave me with the police or the driver of the pumper. He should of left me with the police; I probably would have stayed out of trouble that way.

The excitement of being a firefighter, responding to calls, fighting fires, helping people, was unmatched by anything else. But once you got there, you realized there was more to it than just that. First of all, you realized that the fire service was made up of special people. People that valued family. Little did you know that soon you'd belong to two families, the one at home, and the one down at the firehouse. You know the firehouse family I'm talking about. The one your spouse is jealous of. We've all heard, "he rather spend time at that firehouse than with me" or as my wife would say "in order for me to get his attention I need a siren on my head and red lights on my chest!" Well, come to think of it

now, it would grab one's attention. You know who I'm talking about; you're out there. My ex used to say "I can't get you off of the couch to go to my mothers, but that darn pager goes off and you're running down the driveway with one leg in your pants yelling yahoo. What do I have to do to get you to do that when it's time to go to my mom's?" I said "simple, start her house on fire." In all seriousness, you realized that it DOES take a special person to do this. The kind of person that loves to help people and lives to be challenged. As we already know, you give a firefighter any problem and he or she will solve it. You give any firefighter any challenge, and they'll beat it. Its because we can do it and do it well no matter what it is. Firefighters truly are the jack-of-all-trades, but we're the masters of them all. We have to be, because that's what the public expects from us. We can figure out just about anything. Thinking their way through things is a good thing, but we still need to remember that at times it can also be a bad thing, and get us into trouble by being a little bit too aggressive. But the reality is, firefighters are talented and are the cream of the crop in society.

### **The Firefighter**

Lets talk about this person, the firefighter, for a minute. What kind of qualities does it take to be a firefighter? We already know that they need to care about people, but probably most of all they need to have a love for the job. That unshakable passion of being a firefighter. You know the one that never leaves you. But how do they get it? I love this job more than life itself, my family comes first, but I love this job. That passion didn't just appear one day. It came from inside. It came from my father who was a firefighter and from being around great people like my mentors. People that love this job so much you couldn't help but admire them. People like Chief Jack McCastland, who taught me my firefighter 1 when I was 18 years old. Mac said then, "You want to be a good firefighter, you need to know building construction and fire behavior. You have to know how the building is going to react with the fire and how the fire is going to react with the building. Anyone can go out there and chop, but you still need to

know building construction and fire behavior.” How very true. The first time I saw Mac was at a fire. There was this big guy, leather helmet all bent up in the front, pike pole in one hand pulling sheet rock and a nozzle in the other hand, which he was opening and closing with his chin. I said “man I want to be like this guy.” People like Chief Eddy Enright, who taught me about caring for and respecting your guys. He’d always say, “Look for their positives Rick. Anyone can pick out the negatives. You do that and the negatives tend to go away. Catch them doing something right. It’s easy to catch them doing something wrong.” And others like one of my best friends Chief Tom Freeman, for being one of the smartest firefighter I’ve ever met and sharing that knowledge with me. Saying things like “A good officer or incident commander is the one that can predict his next alarm. Any mope in a white helmet can stand outside and handle what he’s got right now and burn it to the ground, but it’s the guy that can predict his next alarm, knows when he needs more resources before he runs out, where the fires going, and can think out of that box, that does well.” But probably the most important thing that they taught me was that you have to have *core values*, such as *pride*, *honor*, and *integrity*. And every last bit of it starts with integrity. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who talk about integrity, profess that they have integrity, but do not.

## **Integrity**

Integrity is built on character. Its built on honesty. Honesty with both yourself and those around you. It takes having values. There’s more to it than just saying you have integrity. Just because I sleep in the garage one night, that doesn’t make me a car. You have to live it. Because when you really look at the whole issue, integrity does serve as the foundation for character and simply put, your character is defined by how you act when no one is around. By how you act and what you do, when no one is looking. You want to see an example of someone with integrity? Look to Bill Manning, the Editor of *Fire Engineering Magazine*. That guy works for us, the fire service, every single day. Bringing issues

to light and fighting for us when someone has wronged us. His editorials are great and yes some of them tick people off. But they're suppose to! They're supposed to get some of the people out there off their "Sector C" and into the forefront. Remember the "White" magazine cover on the August of '95 issue? No picture. The one that was suppose to depict the perfectly safe fireground. That was a response to all of the complaints regarding some of the safety issues with some of the magazine cover photos and how this guy didn't have his hood on or this one didn't have his boots pulled up or this guy didn't do this or have that. Bill by no means condones unsafe acts, but his point was to look at the covers, see what's going on in the country and more important, take a look at the cover and compare it to your department. What's going on in the picture and if that was your department how would you handle it and what would you do. He wants us to learn something from them. I've sat down at the kitchen table at the firehouse with one of those covers and got an hour's worth of tactics and strategy out of it. Or how about the April issue back in '93 that had the photo of a Denver Colorado firefighter unconscious in a room. That one generated a lot of talk and some people were upset by it saying, "how could you put a picture of a brother on the cover like that?" What they didn't realize was, that it was a reenactment of the fire in Denver that claimed the life of veteran engineer Mark Langvardt. The point being made by then Captain Dave McGrail now Battalion Chief McGrail, was that in this 6 foot by 11 foot room with only 28 inches of working space, a windowsill height of 42 inches and a window opening of 20 inches, that as hard as they tried, and they tried to the point of exhaustion, they couldn't get Mark out of the window. And they tried just about everything. Those of you that have drilled and trained on the "Denver Rescue" know just how difficult that rescue can be. The editorials, the pictures, they're suppose to stimulate interest. They're supposed to get you thinking.

## **Honor**

Honor is built by respect and loyalty. Esprit' de corps and caring enough about those around you that you would do anything for them. And that's on duty and off. The brotherhood to me means more than just a sticker on the windshield of your car. It means that when your kids are sick we help out. That when you're having a tough time with your bills, we help. That when you need to move into your new house, we move you and when that new house needs a new roof, we tear off the old one and we re-roof it. It also means that I would lie next to you and burn the ears off of my head before I would ever leave you in a burning building. Honor is also not allowing anyone to give your company or department a black eye or anything to hurt its reputation. You want to see an example of honor, take a look at the majority of the instructors teaching in the fire service today. Most trying to share or make it all a little better or safer and hoping to do nothing more than make a difference in the lives of the firefighters that they teach. Each on a mission to teach firefighters how to go home from fires. I guarantee that you'll see honor, and pride.

## **Pride**

But pride doesn't just happen. Pride takes work. It requires ownership. I received my first true lesson in pride and ownership about 20 years ago. Tommy usually gets embarrassed when I tell this story but too bad Tommy; it's a great story. We were working a fire in an old school building. We were on the second floor chasing fire in the void spaces, cutting floor away and opening up walls. I began to notice a crew across the room trying to get their saw started. This went on for a while. A couple of them put their axes down to help try and start it, forgetting that their axes will always do the one thing their saw won't. Start. But while this was going on, another company officer, a Lieutenant named Tom Shervino, looked to his chief and said, "let me go get my saw chief." Tommy said it again and the chief said wait a minute longer. But Tommy persisted and finally his chief gave in and said, "Go get your saw

Tom.” So off Tom went and soon he returned with his saw. One pull and it started and off he was cutting. A short time later he stopped, went into the hallway, refueled his saw, and was back cutting. He knew when his saw was going to run out of fuel before it did. He knew how to start it. He knew everything about it because it was his saw. By the way the other crew never got their saw started. I first thought, how arrogant, my saw! Later, when I was outside getting ready to pick up and return to quarters, I saw Tom and asked him what he meant by his saw. He looked at me a bit confused with my question and said, “That’s not my saw. That’s Oak Lawn’s saw. But it’s my saw today and that’s my Squad. That’s my company.” They weren’t his personal items but he owned them that day, on his shift. Then it hit me. This guy was proud of his department, proud of his company, proud of his tools, and with this pride came ownership. There have been a couple of people lately that have written that “pride” is a bad thing. I’m not talking about the pride that is associated with arrogance and creates problems. I’m talking about that feeling you get with a job well done or that you get when you talk about your department. That pride is a *good* thing.

And while we’re on the subject of pride, honor and integrity. Provide promotional ceremonies. Have them raise their right hand and swear to protect and serve. Have the Mayor pin their badge on them or if their dad is a retired or active firefighter, let them pin it on. Let the people important in their lives join them on this special day and let them pin their collar pins on. This could be a spouse, one of their parents, a child or an officer that helped them or mentored them. Make it special. Too many people have gotten their badge when they were promoted in their mailbox or the old “give me that one and I’ll give you this one.” And take lots of pictures. Make it special because it is. By the way, what happened to the pictures of the guys? You know, after a call or next to their rig. A friend of mine, Peter Hodge, and I were talking over a cup of coffee one day and he said you know we used to have the guys in the pictures with their rigs. Now we just have pictures of the rigs. And give them an awards ceremony and

do it annually. Invite their families. Have the victims from some of the incidents that you responded to present them with the awards if you can. This can really work out great for you. During one of our recent awards ceremonies, we gave out the Award of Valor and several other awards. One in particular was for a CPR save. While we had the companies on stage we invited the “victim” to join us and present the awards to the guys that saved his life. Up until that point nobody knew who he was. Most thought he was a relative of one of our firefighters or maybe a past politician. No one realized that he was the guy who was down in full cardiac arrest after jogging and was there to thank them for saving his life. When we were done there wasn’t a dry eye in the house. Celebrate their accomplishments and brag about them. Same thing when you place a new rig in service. Do it right. Announce over the radio the retirement of the old rig and welcome aboard the new one, give it a bath and push it in the firehouse (with the help of the driver) like we did in the “olden” days. Let them have company logos. Something to be proud of. When I got to Lewisville there were just two companies with logos. I asked the troops where the rest of the company logos were and they said there hasn’t been much support in the past from the administration and had to pay for them on their own. How much do decals and flags cost? How much of a return are you going to get back in pride? Support that and maybe you won’t have to talk to them about taking care of the rig so often. ***Put the firefighter back in the firefighter and the firehouse back in the firehouse.*** Allow them to love the job and to have the passion.

### **What Kind of a Firefighter Do You Want to Be?**

With all of that in mind, you need to ask yourself the question of; what kind of firefighter do you want to be? How do you want people or for that matter your fire service brothers and sisters to feel about you. Where does it all start? It all starts on day one. Your first day! Once again, what did you get into this profession for? What do you really want to get out of it? For years a lot of our folks have sat around and reminisced about how it use to be and tell stories about that “star” rookie that walked into

the firehouse. Great attitude and all. The kind of new firefighter that after you sat them down and filled him or her in on how it all works and what is expected of them, they only had one request; That when you needed something done, anything, that you think of them first. And many of these same people ask where did they all go and you just don't see that kind of attitude anymore. The answer is a simple one. They're right in front of us. They're the new guys walking in the door and it's most of the people we already have. We kind of forgot to instill those core values we talked about. As that firefighter, do you have that passion for the job? If not yet, do you feel it growing inside of you? Are you willing to commit to *our* family? To *our* tradition? Understanding that you really have to live by those core values. That you don't disrespect the fire service family. That you don't steal from a brother or a sister or cut a brother's throat at the kitchen table with trash talk. That you would do anything to make our profession better and anything to protect our family. That you would do the right thing. Keeping in mind that doing the right thing doesn't mean doing the right thing for the wrong reasons or in order to hurt someone. But doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do! Do you think about the things you did or said today and do you regret any of it? If you do, how would you fix any of it? Remembering what I say in 30 seconds of passion can hang around for 3 years or better. And also trying to not fall into the trap where you think the shift before you are the slobs and the shift after you are the nitpickers only to find out that when you switch shifts, your guys were the slobs or the nitpickers, and so on.

### **The Rookie**

As a rookie, remember you're starting your legacy when you walk through that door for the first time. It all has to start somewhere so why not with you? Great firefighters have to come from somewhere. Why can't it be you? It really doesn't take much, if you live by those core values that we discussed. Nobody's perfect. I've said for years that "perfect people" and "know-it-alls" in the fire

service can get you hurt and killed. You don't have to be perfect to be a great firefighter. You just need good heart!

There are three things needed to be successful though:

- 1) Do what is right
- 2) Do your best
- 3) Treat others as you would like to be treated ...and then watch those relationships grow!

Get involved with your department. Study it. Understand its heritage, where it all started, who got it there and be concerned with where it is going. Soak up as much as you can. Get as much training as you can. Go to classes and attend seminars. Ask questions and read something about this job every day. Become as informed as you possibly can about our job because when you get down to the point in your career where you know it all, you're a step away from disaster. Be the best you can be and stay positive. It's easy to sit around the kitchen table and find things wrong or complain. It's harder to think about and talk about the good things. And consider becoming one of the "Go-To-Guys." Someone that people can depend on to get the job done. The person that the boss can *go to* because they know you'll do it and do it well and usually without complaint. And I don't mean a "Sector C" kisser or apple polisher. Just simply, the "Go-To-Guy."

### **Your Own Size-Up**

In closing here are some points to ponder:

- Show up on time for your shift or your weekly meeting or drill.
- Wear your uniform, take care of it and be proud of it.
- Take care of the firehouse. It is your home!
- Take care of your apparatus. It's not just an image thing. (Think about it!)
- What shape are your tools in? Are they rusted and stuck to the side of the rig?

- Are you still learning your trade? Remember to learn your trade before you learn the tricks.
- Train as if your life depends on it. Because it does!
- Are you training on firefighter survival and have you subscribed to Chief Billy Goldfeder's FirefighterCloseCalls.com? (A great fire service brother by the way!!)
- Are you *controlling* or *contributing* to the gossip, rumor, and character assassination mill?
- Remember that you are creating your own legacy. It starts your first day.
- Market your department and defend our profession.
- Remember what you owe the public.
- Are you as proud of the job off duty as you are on duty and vice versa?
- Are you passionate about our profession and are you willing to leave it better for the next guy?
- Are we taking care of each other? For real?
- DO YOU HAVE THE LOVE FOR THE JOB?

You can make a difference if you want to. It is the best job in the world. It's up to you!