

The Rookie Firefighter: Preparing for the Role

BY JERRY WELLS

CAN YOU STILL REMEMBER your first day at the firehouse? The excitement I had the night before prevented me from getting a good night's rest. But that didn't matter. I was energized with enthusiasm on my first day. I was lucky. I had been assigned to a brand new firehouse with a brand new engine. My dad was a career firefighter and had prepared me for my first day with some good advice (lucky again). For those of you who do not have someone to prepare you for your first day, I hope to offer some advice like my dad did for me. But before we get too far into your career, let's back up a few years and work our way forward.

BEFORE YOU GET HIRED

There is no argument. We have one of the "most trusted" professions in the country. In national surveys, we often rank above police officers and clergy. It is for this reason that most fire departments conduct a very in-depth background investigation of prospective members. We hire only the very best citizens from the pool of applicants. If you are considering a career in the fire service, the following will offer you direction to accomplish your goal.

How is your driving/criminal record? You would never think that your conduct at age 17, 18, or 19 could negatively impact a chance for a career job opportunity, especially the fire service. However, time and time again, the choices people make negatively impact their dream of becoming a firefighter. Examples of bad decisions include driving while under the influence of alcohol, experimenting with drugs, committing a theft, and actions that could negatively impact your character. We have all made choices we are not proud of. Think of it this way: What do you want to try to defend in a job interview or background investigation?

What have you been doing on your own to prepare yourself for the fire

service? Consider what kind of classes will offer the best education in preparation for the fire service. Take the right courses that will prepare you for such a dynamic career. Algebra is used to calculate drug dosages. Correct spelling and grammar are musts to accurately complete EMS and fire reports. Computer skills are needed for communication, research, and presentations. Chemistry is used in a hazardous materials response, and biology will be helpful with anatomy and physiology. A firefighter is often described as a "jack of all trades." In a given shift, we could be asked to become electricians, framers, plumbers, and locksmiths, just to name a few. This is because we respond to almost every kind of call imaginable. It is helpful to be a well-rounded firefighter. When preparing for the job, don't forget physical fitness. Firefighting is physically demanding. Cardiac stamina and strength conditioning are important for a successful career. This you can start in high school.

Have you donated any of your time to your local fire department to start gaining experience? Many departments have a cadet or an Explorer Post program. These programs typically allow individuals as young as 15 years of age to join and get involved. Contact a fire department near you and ask if it has a ride-along program. Some departments even have a mentoring program. These departments have taken a proactive approach to recruiting quality applicants.

I know that a very common question in a fire service interview is, "What have you done to prepare yourself for this job?" The current trend in fire departments in our region and other areas is to hire people who are already certified firefighters with paramedic certification preferred. Another way to market yourself is to enroll in a certified firefighter training school or paramedic school. However, some departments will send you back through their own academy so

that all their members are trained in a consistent manner. Competition can be stiff. There are large numbers of applicants competing for fire service opportunities. Unfortunately, the factors that affect your odds could depend strictly on where you live or where you want to work. Whatever you can do to set yourself apart from the others will be worth your investment.

YOUR FIRST DAY

So here we are again back at the firehouse for your first shift. You are so excited and nervous that you can't tell the two apart. You know first impressions are so important, but the only advice you received so far was "Be seen and not heard." This is great advice, but there is a little more to it. Think of your new assignment as being adopted into a family. Remember, this is a close group of professionals who have already been through a lot together. They have developed relationships and established a pecking order, so to speak; but, most of all, they trust one another. You will have to earn their respect and trust and eventually find a comfortable position on the team.

When you walk into that firehouse and sit down, you are probably sitting in someone's seat. Don't sit down. It is time to go to work. You have so much to learn that you don't have time to sit anyway.

As a young officer, I had the privilege of spending a weekend with members of the Fire Department of New York. I noticed the "ROOKIE'S TEN COMMANDMENTS" hanging on several walls around the firehouse. It was a list of rules that every new recruit would learn. I remember one was to be the last to bed; another was to be the first to rise in the morning.

I was with the battalion chief, and we had just come back from a late-night visit to another firehouse. When we got back in quarters, the rookie assigned to

that house was sitting on the island in the kitchen looking exhausted. I greeted him and asked him why he was still up; in mid-sentence, I remembered the “Ten Commandments.” I asked if he was waiting up for us, and he bashfully nodded yes. I was so impressed with this young firefighter throughout my visit, but what was even more impressive was the respect he received in return from the senior members. They treated him like a teammate, not an outsider. By the way, he was already up and working when I got up early the next morning.

Several years ago, I had a young firefighter who could not seem to keep his eyes open once he sat down, such as during training classes. I was 19 years old once, and I could relate. I took him out to the engine tailboard and talked to him about how easy it was to get a bad reputation and how long it would take to overcome a slow start in this career. I told him that I admired his commitment to the job at such a young age but told him that he was a valuable part of my team and I needed him to be ready to work at a moment’s notice. I explained that he had actually “signed on” to give the citizens and his fellow firefighters two—not one, but two—nights out of three. Seeing his puzzled expression, I explained that he obviously had to be at the firehouse one night of the three. The second night, the night before his shift, I expected him to get enough rest to be a valuable asset to my team while on shift. About seven years have passed, and this firefighter is still working under my command; I am very proud of the firefighter he has become.

“POLISHING THE BRASS”

For decades, the last thing a firefighter would do when washing a rig or cleaning a tool would be to “polish the brass”—you know, put the finishing touches on a particular project. With that in mind, when it is time to go to work, do all your projects with pride, whether leading out with the first handline, loading hose after the job, or just doing firehouse chores. It is not always just about washing a pumper or mopping an apparatus floor; it is about having pride in the job, your profession. Do your chores with pride, check your saw with pride, cook (when it is your turn) with pride, and by all means

clean the firehouse with pride—stand behind your work. You do it for your side job, don’t you?

I had a rookie who always chose to clean the toilets. He took enormous pride in doing the job completely and always with a little extra touch. You could smell the clean. I admired this because I would never allow the members to assign station duties. We all knew what needed to be done, and every shift we had to work together to get it all done, yet this firefighter elected to do what most considered to be the least desirable job. Today he is a driver/engineer under my command and continues to promote these values in everything he does. So you see, it is not just about cleaning toilets; it is about taking care of business. Polish the brass!

Below is a checklist to help you move in a positive direction. Feel free to add to it based on your own experiences.

- Make wise choices at an early age that could affect your future.
- Prepare yourself with a quality education.
- Volunteer to gain knowledge and experience.
- Find a way to get involved. Learn all that you can about the department in which you are interested.
- Prove you are worthy to be on the team.
- Walk the walk, don’t talk. They will notice. They always do.
- Show respect.
- Do chores with pride.
- **Polish the brass!**

The next time a young future firefighter comes to you or your firehouse and is searching for some direction, I hope you take the time to talk with him. Be a mentor. Remember to pass along this article. The future of our profession depends on our next generation. ●