

I was incredibly nervous to start my first ethnography research. I thought it was just a glorified writing assignment. Little did I know that the people I met and the things I learned would change my view regarding the topic and rid me of my ignorance. I visited a fire station during the course of first semester of my freshman year. From the street in front I could see through the clear doors into the garage and the engines and pickup trucks that were parked inside. I went inside not knowing what to expect at all and met with the fire prevention officer. We talked a bit about my project and he showed me around the station. After exploring the station and engine for a while I met two of the members of the shift I would be observing who just got back from a training exercise. Mr. Ryan was a Caucasian male of average height with short graying hair slicked back. He had a wide build and looked to be fit for his age as he was approaching his fifties. "What's up brother?" he said as he firmly shook my hand. The other, Mr. Adams is again a Caucasian male, a little taller than average with graying dark hair. He is also the engineer on the shift.

I had been observing the group of firefighters for a few weeks by now and my project shifted from observing them to spending time with them. We relaxed around the station and watched some television since the firefighters always get their chores and training done in the morning and I usually walked into the station at around four or five. There was a commercial break that started out with a Vagisil ad. "You ever had that problem?" Mr. Ryan says to the two firefighters. They both smile and laugh. Mr. Adams has a trio of little girls. "You're starting a taco stand" said Mr. Ryan to him. Mr. Phillips told them about his twin brother (who is also on the department) babysitting his kids that night because his wife had a prior obligation. Mr. Phillips has two young children and a teenage stepson. He got a call from one of his kids talking about the night and what they have been doing. Mr. Phillips was talking on the phone and laughing at times because one of the younger ones told about the two bloody noses that already happened. Family is everything to these firefighters. Even though they are away from them two or three days a week, the firefighters have their family visit and call all the time.

Family is the topic of many conversations held in the station. Mr. Ryan told me that "...unless a guy is really tight lipped you get to know everything about their, his family, his marriage, his kids... [T]he guys bring their families in whenever they want and visit..."(Wisher). The support and love that comes from firefighters' families helps the firefighters handle the stress that they face on the job. The authors of *Behind the Brotherhood: Rewards and challenges for Wives of Firefighters* write:

The support of family is paramount to reducing the impact of highly stressful work on emergency responders. In research conducted on emergency service personnel, social support of others, including family and friends, was significantly negatively correlated with scores on both trauma symptom scales and depression scales (King, King, Fairbank, Keane, & Adams, 1997; Leffler & Dembert, 1998; Regehr, Hemsworth, & Hill, 2001; Weiss, Marmar, Metzler, & Ronfeldt, 1995). Further, those who had higher levels of family support were less likely to take mental health stress leaves from work following a traumatic event (Regehr, Goldberg, Glancy, & Knott, 2002). Yet

family members are not immune from the stresses encountered by loved ones who place themselves in the line of fire. (Bright, 2)

In an interview, Mr. Ryan said: "...[I]’ve seen some things that have messed me up... usually I’ll deal with it, with my wife...". Firefighting is one of the most stressful and emotional jobs because of the things that are dealt with and are witnessed by the firefighters. In an interview with Mr. Ryan, he said firefighters usually have a very coarse sense of humor that may surprise some people but that is the way that firefighters deal with the stress in their occupations. "...[I] carried a guy’s leg down the street about a block and one of my guys says: ‘Man I got a pair of boots like that’”(Wisher). The things that firefighters see would be very stressful to those that haven’t taught themselves to deal with it. ““The reality of it is that a lot of firefighters, and for their families, this has come to be perceived as a riskier operation, and it’s having mental health consequences, marital consequences, drug and alcohol abuse consequences, you name it””(Finn). There are cases of firefighters not being able to handle the stress of their job. This is called burnout and it can cause a lot of problems in the firefighters’ life like those mentioned earlier of alcohol abuse and so on. All firefighters develop a system to relieve their stress and get over the intense emotions that come with the job.

These intense emotions really come over firefighters during emergency calls. Close to the end of my time at the station; I asked Mr. Ryan about the large fire that destroyed a corner building in downtown Champaign. He told me that he was there and explained the fire and how it progressed. He pulled up a couple of pictures a fellow firefighter e-mailed to him on the computer in his office. It was a three story building that was engulfed in flames and eventually collapsed. I rode past it on the buss a week prior to him telling me this and there were only a few burnt beams left between the charred sides of the neighboring buildings. It was one of the biggest fires they have had in a while Mr. Ryan told me.

I started going on calls with the firefighters after two months. The first one that I was in the truck for was a small “box fire” as they call it. We drove to the corner of Oak and Gregory to see an unattended fire pit that was still burning. One of the firefighters grabbed some kind of fire extinguisher that has to be pumped out of one of the compartments on the truck and put it out. As he was putting it out the other two poked around the contents of the pit with a pike and a shovel to clear out all of the embers. The whole process took from five to ten minutes. I was also in the station when the alarm rang at nine thirty and a women dispatcher’s voice said that there was a possible fire at a fraternity house over the intercom. I walked into the garage and got into the truck with Mr. Ryan. The two other firefighters went to sleep and walked out of the bedrooms into the garage. “This might be something” said Mr. Phillips as he pulled up the pants of his fire suit.

Here on a large college campus many of the calls that the firefighters get; deal with students or other members of the university. There is a system that the department has set up where the firefighters walk through certain buildings every few shift to familiarize themselves with them. Mr. Adams was telling me about their walkthroughs earlier that day as we walked outside into the garage and looked out onto the street. His kids called him on his cell phone and were asking him what to do about an animal in the window well. Mr. Adams told them to do something about it, asked about mom, and told them to “call me back when you get a kill”. His conversation with his kids continued as the department chief pulled up in a department pick-up truck and handed Mr.

Adams a can of spray paint. I introduced myself and told him what I was doing there. He told me who he was and asked if the members of the shift have been giving me any trouble. "Not yet" I said laughing. Mr. Adams told him what was going on at his house and the Chief put in some of his own advice before leaving. I had already met about six or seven members of the department by this point.

I met yet another member of the department working. She (Kelly) was a pretty blonde at about five foot five. She one of the two women on the entire department; however, the other woman is on military leave. She was cleaning and doing some maintenance work on the axes and pikes from the truck. She told me that the only real challenge she faced as a woman firefighter was during the academy. She was used as an example more so than everyone else in the class who were all males.

In their essay called *The Effect of Working With Women on Male Attitudes Toward Female Firefighters*, Craig and Jacobs conducted a survey on women firefighters. They wrote that the first woman firefighter was a woman named Judy Livers who became a firefighter in 1974. They also mention a study done by T.M. Floren that said women believe they are given easier assignments and feel pressure to work harder. According to the International Association of Women in Fire and Emergency Services' website, there are about 6,140 women currently working as firefighters in the U.S. In Illinois there are 183 women spread over 66 departments and one female department chief. Women have a little harder time becoming firefighters because of sexual harassment and recruitment in general. The number of women firefighters has risen over the years but is nowhere close to equal. We spoke for a little while and her cell phone rang playing the Chicago Cubs song.

The firefighter Kelly was working for is Mr. Phillips. He is about six foot two with the build of a football player. He has a buzz haircut and a tribal band tattoo on his right arm. At this point all three of the shift members were sitting on the recliners in the living room watching TV and talking as I sat on the last empty recliner and watched a murder investigation documentary on TLC. I asked them if they dealt with many violent crimes in the area. Most of them are shootings and there are about five or six incidents which are non-fatal more times than not that they deal with each year they told me. "Those guys in Urbana are bad shots" said Mr. Phillips. Firefighters deal with almost every medical call in their designated area. They assist the paramedics in many cases such as violent crimes, cardiac, arrests, personal injuries and anything else one can think of. The firefighters told me that they are not supposed to give out many details but that earlier that day they had a call about a thirty year old man that passed away of a cardiac arrest and an older gentleman that fell down a flight of stairs. That is why many firefighters and fire departments want or require EMT training.

EMT certification is an important qualification that many firefighters and departments want. There are three different levels of EMT certification according to the US Department of Labor they are: EMT-Basic, EMT-Intermediate, and EMT-Paramedic. "At the EMT-Basic level, coursework emphasizes emergency skills, such as managing respiratory, trauma, and cardiac emergencies, and patient assessment. Formal courses are often combined with time in an emergency room or ambulance. The program provides instruction and practice in dealing with bleeding, fractures, airway obstruction, cardiac arrest, and emergency childbirth. Students learn how to use and maintain common emergency equipment..." (www.bls.gov).

I was sitting at the dining table with the firefighters watching the TV about midway through my time with them. As Old School started, Mr. Phillips pulled out a stack of forms to fill out for his EMS class. He has to fill out forms with the details of all the medical calls and has a certain quota to fill in order to get his certification. He also has to attend a class twice a week, log in hours at an emergency room, and in an ambulance under the supervision of a certified EMT. He was talking to Mr. Ryan about the forms and how a lot of the questions on it were hard to fully answer such as pain level. He was filling out a form for a man who had a cardiac arrest and was dead before the truck even pulled up. "Pain level? He was dead".

Heart problems are a common occurrence that firefighters not only get called for but deal with themselves as well. I walked into the gym where Mr. Ryan was running on the treadmill watching the history channel. Perpendicular to the living room was a hallway with about 8 or 9 doors off to the sides. There were three separate bedrooms each with two cots in it, three small bathrooms and a fitness room at the end of the hall. The fitness room is a small one made up of a small rack of free weights, treadmill, elliptical, a multi-purpose weight machine, and a TV. Physical fitness is an important attribute that firefighters have to put time into since they go through some of the most strenuous activity in the working world. They can be at a call that lasts for five minutes or five hours. They are required to keep fit by the job itself and have to be ready to put that fitness level to work at any time.

He told me about the daily activities they did like building walkthroughs, inventory of the truck, housework, studying for a captain's test that was coming up. Continuing education is a large part of being a firefighter. The members train on almost every shift and if they don't, they participate in building walkthroughs. There are also many training classes that firefighters take to learn new techniques that would make things safer and quicker for the firefighters. There is a whole bookshelf in the lieutenants office filled with binders and books from various training practices. Going up in rank requires studying and taking classes which Mr. Ryan spends a lot doing to preparing himself for the captain's test. This test is a strenuous and highly critiqued assessment that takes the course of a few days. According to the US department of labor website, in order for firefighters to increase their rank they must: "...acquire expertise in advanced firefighting equipment and techniques, building construction, emergency medical technology, writing, public speaking, management and budgeting procedures, and public relations" (par. 18). In an interview, Mr. Ryan told me "...like me with this promotional thing; I study whenever I get a chance".

He was sitting in his office showered, with his hair slicked back. We spoke a little about training and he showed me a thick binder full of pictures and descriptions of a procedure involving a very intricate system of ropes. He told me that they have to know the purpose for each one of the many ropes that were all braided together. He slipped the binder back among the many that crowded the bookshelf in his office and sat back at his desk when Kelly walked in and told him that she was done cleaning the tools and asked when she should start cooking the shift's meal. Mr. Ryan said he doesn't care when but "the Cubs are on at five, so all I need's a TV". Then Kelly and Mr. Ryan told me about fire prevention week that was coming up and how the station goes to Lincoln Square to teach young children about fire prevention. Mr. Ryan told us about one time when he took part in the presentation for the children and at the end one of the mothers of one of the children told Mr. Ryan that her child was in awe of the firefighters and asked if the child could give Mr. Ryan a hug. Then a whole group of children came over and gave him a hug. Kelly had a large smile on her face

that was missing only an “awww”. “It was awesome” said Mr. Ryan. I did not see anything worth noting about a difference in relationships between men and men and women. Kelly asked about cooking their meal and that fit into the stereotype of women cooking for men but she seemed genuinely happy to do it. They are all family so anything one can do to help the others is something they are happy to do. Dinner is brings the entire station together every shift. The firefighters leave any chores or paperwork they are doing and come together to eat dinner. They either go to the store to buy ingredients so they can cook their own meals or go out for takeout together.

I was in the living room of the station with the three firefighters when Mr. Adams said “Alright boys, I’m hungry”. All four of us got into the truck and got ready to go out and get dinner. As we were walking out they told me that I better not get hurt because they didn’t have the correct papers on file. They told me that they would have to get rid of the body so they don’t get in trouble and I said: “You know how to now after watching that show”. They laughed, agreed, and said that the show was good preparation. Mr. Adams was driving since he is an engineer while Mr. Ryan was in the passenger seat of the cramped cab and Mr. Phillips and I were sitting in the back. Mr. Ryan was the only one to put on his fire jacket but Mr. Phillips and Mr. Adams took their radios off and strapped them across their chests. Before we even left the garage a group of four college girls walked across the garage and Mr. Ryan said: “they were really staring us over...It’s probably Andrei though”. He looked back and smiled at me laughing as the truck left the garage.

Being in the truck for the first time was an experience like no other. Everybody looked our way and the sirens weren’t even on. Talking with the crew there has yielded many references to driving the truck and the looks they get; saying things along the lines of it’s nice to see everyone looking at us, every boy wants to ride in a fire truck, and it is empowering. We got stuck at a stop light and I turned to Mr. Phillips and asked him if he is ever tempted to just turn on the sirens; he smiled and said that he personally does, especially when they get stuck in traffic. We stopped at Fat Sandwich Company and Mr. Phillips got out of the truck to go check to see if it was open. While I waited in the engine with Mr. Adams and Mr. Ryan we saw a couple on the sidewalk across the street and Mr. Adams says: “they’re gonna lean in for a kiss”. Immediately Mr. Ryan and I looked over and waited for them to do so. They went their separate ways without filling Mr. Adams’s prediction.

As an eighteen year old boy, my eyes tend to wander towards my fellow peers of the opposite sex. My friends and I base many conversations on this topic. The sight of women has sparked many conversations between the firefighters also; especially when we are on the truck. I have no doubt that if some people were to hear these conversations they would be offended. The firefighters know this too. They have told me that the conversations they have and the language they use is often very coarse and offensive. I cannot put into word how happy I am that they are comfortable enough around me to have these conversations and even include me in them. They were a bit awkward at the beginning but as I got to know them and build a friendship with them, which happened quite quickly, it became normal and expected.

I walked into the station one night and there sat on the table three or four Tempe 12 calendars titled: Girls of the Big Ten. “Got some reading material for you” said Mr. Adams. They ate their dinner and we started to watch Old School on the TV in the dining room. Mr. Adams went into the living room to watch Ocean’s Twelve. Mr. Phillips and Mr. Ryan began to tell me about the day

they had before I got to the station. They already had upwards of five calls on the day so there was a good chance that there would be another one for me to tag along on. I was having a conversation with Mr. Phillips when I noticed a large American flag on the wall above the TV that was a memorial flag for the deaths that occurred on September 11. I asked him if he noticed a change in the way people view firefighters here in the Midwest and if there was a lot of emotion going through the department. He told me that he has only been on the department for two year but his brother did notice a change. He said people became more aware of the danger that firefighters face and became more respectful. On the topic of emotion, well he told me he was not an emotional person and “My brother, like me, just wanted to know who the hell should we go bomb”. I had a conversation about 9-11 with Mr. Ryan and the statement that stuck out the most was: “343 brothers died”. Firefighters as a group consider themselves family. Even though Mr. Ryan did not know many, if any, firefighters that died he still considers them brothers. Many of the firefighters told me that the station is like a frat house and they are all family; a family with rank. “There’s a hierarchy” said one of the first firefighters I met as he was laughing.

Fire departments are ranked kind of like the military. It is a little less complicated with a smaller number of ranks but follows the same pattern. Firefighters come into the station for a probationary period which lasts from six months to a year. After that they are certified as a firefighter and there are different levels of firefighter that can be worked towards. To increase the level of firefighter one must take different classes and participate in more involved training practices. Engineers are the ones who drive the truck and handle the pump panel at the call. There are a few lieutenants, captains, and one department chief in the department. In an interview, Mr. Ryan told me that rank only changes the relationship between the firefighters on calls because the lieutenant is in charge and makes the decisions but in the station everyone is equal. Firefighters don’t see each other as being more important than the other because of rank. There is always someone to answer to but they are best friends. They do not let rank get between them.

Near the end of my time at the station, Mr. Ryan got promoted to captain. He will be moving to the downtown station in January. The first member of the station I met was the Fire Prevention Officer. He is a tall African American man who has been in the fire service for a good portion of his life. He used to be a firefighter but a heart condition had him moved to a position that did not expose him to anything that could be detrimental to his health. The next couple of members I met were active firefighters and filling in for two of the original members of the shift that was chosen for me to observe. They were both Caucasian males wearing blue Urbana Fire Dept. polo shirts and blue pants. They were sitting in the living room watching the USA network. As soon as I introduced myself they immediately started telling me about firefighter life and answered any questions I had.

When I asked them how they felt about their occupations they said “I love it”, “It’s the best job in the world”, and “I show up a half hour early”. They showed me what happens when they get a call and the alarm that sounds. It sounds kind of like a fire alarm, not what they show in the movies. There is a loud buzzing noise followed by someone from dispatch giving a quick description of the call and where it is. Then they began to tell me about what their job consists of. “Whatever the cops don’t do, we do” they told me. They continued to tell me about the details of firefighting such as the union, raises and the department as a whole. The Urbana departments, along with many others in the country are part of the International Association of Firefighters Union local 1147.

According to the IAFF official website, the IAFF was created in 1918 to help firefighters who at the time could work seven days a week (par. 3). After the IAFF pushed for the Public Safety Officer Benefit Act for eight years; it was finally signed by President Ford in 1976. This act helped the families of fallen firefighters financially (par. 29, 30). In the early 1980's the IAFF really started pushing for safety standards to be universal among firefighters across the country. They succeeded in implementing requirements for training, organization and equipment that the firefighters use (par. 38). The union also helped develop the Personal Alert Safety System that helped firefighters find each other in dense fire and smoke with an alarm that goes off when a member needs help (par. 43). The IAFF also took a large part in the 9-11 rescues. 343 members of the IAFF died while trying to rescue civilians from the ruined skyscrapers (par. 50, 51). The IAFF continues to keep firefighter conditions as safe as can be and continues to honor the fallen firefighters and help their families get through the tragedy.

Knowing of all of the risks and sacrifices they make; all of the firefighters seemed very comfortable and happy with their job in the station. They smiled and told jokes when they spoke with each other and with me. In one of the rooms connected to the garage where tools are cleaned, there was a white board with the statement: "If you use this room clean it up" in a rectangle on the side of the board. Outside of the rectangle, there was the word: "why?" quickly scribbled on the board. I smirked at the first notion of the personalities in the station.

The rest of the garage holds the two station engines that were parked and ready to go. Engine 24 is the primary "rig" they use and the 222 is there for back up. The garage is also equipped with two pickup trucks and two different trailers for national security trailer and the other is for hazmat.

Here on campus, hazardous material can pose a large problem for the firefighters because of the many different labs. At this time in our society, hazmat training for firefighters is required. There are so many different chemicals that can be involved in fires and different accidents that firefighters get called to. Journalist Linda Weller writes in a local Illinois newspaper called The Telegraph about a group of firefighters from Illinois going to a hazmat training camp in Alton in Madison County. These firefighters train in chemical spills and how to deal with victims exposed to chemicals among other things. This five day training will certify the participants and allow them a greater responsibility when it comes to hazmat accidents. The Illinois Terrorism Task Force provided the financial support needed to hold the training. They learned how to decontaminate the suits they wear in order to keep the problem from spreading. According to Maury Daubs, the lead instructor of the University of Illinois Fire service Institute, the participant will walk away from the training with about 9 different certifications in hazmat (Weller, 1).

"I love this movie" said Mr. Ryan when Old School started. "It's one of my favorites" I told him. Mr. Phillips and Mr. Ryan had their feet up on the chairs in front of them turned towards the TV when Mr. Phillips's phone rang and he spoke with his wife for a few minutes mostly about the kids being babysat by Mr. Phillips's brother. He hung up the phone and told us that his wife said that as soon as she got home, Mr. Phillips's brother had his boots on and was out the door. Mr. Ryan laughed and they began to reminisce about past experiences they had with each other and their families. They told me a story about a time they let a jack russell terrier have his way with a fellow firefighter's wife's pillow. They put it back after about ten minutes. They both had large smiles on their faces and smirked throughout the telling of the story. "That was bad" Mr. Ryan said in

between his smirks. Mr. Phillips told us some more about his twin brother babysitting his kids. He would call and ask Mr. Phillips if he could drink some of Mr. Phillips's alcohol when he was babysitting. Mr. Phillips told him that it was fine with him and he deserved it.

Later in the night there was a party scene in the movie and this started a conversation about their experience with alcohol. Mr. Phillips said: "I went to buy a twelve pack on my twenty-first birthday and they didn't check my ID. I was like: 'I wish I knew that before'". Mr. Ryan said he didn't drink a beer until he turned twenty-one. "I don't remember the next... years" he said; making Mr. Phillips and I laugh. I was waiting to see if there would be a reaction to the sex scene in the movie and there was. "If you ever have any questions we're here for you" said Mr. Ryan. "Alright" I said through a smirk.

One day I was sitting in the station with the firefighters when Mr. Ryan told Mr. Phillips that his fifteen year old daughter wants to date an older guy who has a car and is two or three years older. "I was that age once" he said. "You know what you say to the kid? Whatever you do to her I'll do to you" he said. Mr. Adams has a trio of little girls. "You're starting a taco stand" said Mr. Ryan to him. Mr. Phillips told them about his twin brother (who is also on the department) babysitting his kids that night because his wife had jury duty. Mr. Phillips has two young children and a teenage stepson and he got a call from one of his kids talking about the night and what they have been doing. Mr. Phillips was talking on the phone and laughing at times because one of the younger ones told about the two bloody noses that already happened. Family is everything to these firefighters. Even though they are away from them two or three days a week, the firefighters have their family visit and call all the time.

The movie ended and Mr. Ryan picked up one of the calendars and said: "So August likes...". Both Mr. Phillips and I pick up one of the two remaining calendars and look through it. "It's all yours brother" said Mr. Ryan to me. It was about nine thirty and the firefighters said they were going to bed. I said: "Yeah I have to get back too". "Have a good night brother" said Mr. Ryan to me as he firmly shook my hand

The entrance to the fire station looked just like one of a small office building. I walked out of the main living area of the station and was surrounded by a narrow hallway with white walls, dark blue carpet with specks of gold and red. There were about six doors that opened up to offices down the length of the hallway. They each had a wood finish and a grey handle. It was very bland and it does not compliment the enormous amount of personality and life inside of the station at all. I passed a display set in the wall with picture of all of the members on the department that looked like a graduating class picture. I also saw the call box where I had to hit "3#" to be patched through to the members inside to get in. I got past the last two doors and looked at the large, red brick building. There was Safe Haven sign next to the door.

I walked onto the dimly lit street and headed home. I had a smile on my face and was laughing to myself on the way back. The members of the shift I spent time with are down to earth, macho, family men to put it simply. Jokes and laughing run rampant through the station just like conversation with or about family members. Their movies, build, adrenaline, attitudes, and ability to suppress notions of weakness regarding calls and tragedies are traits that many people associate with men. Their lighthearted attitude regardless of what they go through was completely

unexpected. I am so fortunate for have met these awesome men and I have nothing but respect and care for them. They have taught me so much about not only firefighting but also human resiliency, importance of family, and selflessness

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