Purdue’s Unsung Heroes:
The Purdue University Fire Department

As I entered the Purdue University Fire Department for my first time I was instantly welcomed by a man dressed in a maroon polo t-shirt and navy blue slacks. He stared at me through his glasses pondering what my intentions entailed for entering the Clayton W. DeMent Fire Station, also known to him as his second home. Feeling intimidated from being surrounded by the stranger, the sight of the massive fire trucks, and the smell of freshly cleaned vehicles I was directed to meet with Charles “Chip” Flahive, the Assistant Fire Chief for Shift A. He was dressed in a navy blue shirt, navy blue slacks, and black shoes. After gaining permission to observe the firefighters from Mr. Flahive, I was introduced to the one female firefighter and the six male firefighters of Shift A, Dawn “Admiral” Downey, Bruce Brandt, Brian “Tater” Fultz, Jefferson Howells, Mike “Skeeter” Lasky, Brian Leazenby, and Kent “Gumby” Sales (“Purdue”). As soon as we were introduced, the room returned to its original sounds of laughter and joking, which are common sounds at the fire station. They joked around with each other as if they were brothers and sisters, not just fellow employees. A genuine and positive vibe radiates from every firefighter every minute of the day at the fire station. From my first encounter to my last, I constantly kept note of the unique and powerful relationships these firefighters share with one another at the Purdue University Fire Department and the efforts it takes to ensure these relationships continue to grow.

In order for one to truly understand and appreciate the relationships of the firefighters at the Purdue University Fire Department, one must first be aware of the atmosphere of the fire station. The firefighters spend a large majority of their time at the
station when on duty. When they are on duty, the station is their home and the other firefighters are their family. They eat, sleep, and shower there. The firefighters are responsible for maintaining the upkeep of their second home. They must clean the station just like one would clean their own home. The Purdue Fire Station is the only building on the campus that is not cleaned by custodians. Because they work twenty-four hour shifts and the fire station is never closed, firefighters must prepare for and celebrate holidays at the fire station as well. The predominant locations in the fire station include an addition on the West side of the garage, the centrally located garage area, and the addition on the East side of the garage.

The addition to the West of the garage consists of three offices, labeled Deputy Chief, Captain, and Chief, and a central room with white walls, white tile floors, and white ceilings. A large table sits in the middle of the room, a bulletin board overflowed with different posters is present on one wall, and the other wall is occupied by a pure white dry erase board. A copy machine, television set, and computer are also placed randomly throughout the room. This room fills with firefighters throughout the day, whether someone needs to use the computer, the copy machine, or when the firefighters are responsible for inspecting the medical kits, bags full of different medical supplies that may be necessary to help victims injured in fires. They check the bags by going through each compartment individually. A checklist is used as the basis for the inspection. The different supplies and quantities of supplies required for each med kit is listed on the checklist, and after ensuring the item is present that piece is checked off the list. These inspections are also done on each of the fire trucks. This room is primarily used by the firefighters during the days, and left vacant during most of the evenings.
The garage area consists of three colossal-sized garage doors on the front of the building and three of the same sized garage doors on the backside of the building. The garage doors are usually wide open allowing all of the public to view the trucks as they travel by the station. The garage walls are white and the floors are cement. Clipboards cover a section of one wall, a large photograph of all the firefighters is placed on another wall, and cabinets filled with supplies are on another part of the same wall as the photograph. The Aerial 12, Rescue 14, Engine 11, and Medic 17 are some of the apparatuses, fire trucks, which fill the garage from the front to back of the building (“Purdue”). All of the trucks are parked perfectly between the yellow lines painted on the garage floor. Not a single apparatus has any sign of ever being touched with dirt. The sight of the bright and shiny trucks almost blinds one’s eyes while standing in the garage. A brown door is located on the right side of the garage with an attached red sign that reads in white letters “Authorized Personal Only.” One is not about to enter the last predominant area of the fire station.

As one walks through the door an office sits to the right of the entrance. The Assistant Chief, Chip, is often seen working on the computer located in this office. After walking approximately six feet from the entrance one enters the living room area of the firefighters’ house. The ground is covered by grey carpet with random maroon and hunter green specks. The room is filled with three maroon recliners and three hunter green recliners, two end tables, and a big screen television. The television set is usually displaying images of different sporting events, the news, or music videos. Wooden cabinets surround the entire wall where the TV is located. Brick walls that have been painted a light, bluish-grey color enclose the room. Portraits of fire engines and fire
helmets cover the walls. A dining room area merges with the living room. A wooden, rectangular shaped kitchen table with chairs placed all the way around is found in this area. A partition in the living room divides the kitchen from the rest of this area. All of Shift A meet and eat meals together in their dining room. This room is usually filled with the aroma of dinner. Whether it is meal time or just time to relax, the firefighters can usually be found in this part of the fire station. They spend time sitting around and watching television. The sounds of different conversations are also in the air when everyone meets in this room. This room is also used sometimes when new supplies need to be tested. Understanding the components and details of each of these different areas of the fire station is vital in fully understanding the firefighters of Shift A at Purdue University.

All of these men and women have specific relationships geared toward specific people in the station, which all tie into the impressive and admirable relationship shared by all of these people. Dawn Downey is valued very much by her peers. They turn to her for advice on not only fire related issues, but also issues with everyday life. In a sense she is like the nurturer of the group because she is the only female. She is always making sure meals are being prepared and everyone is doing the job they were assigned to do that day. Chip Flahive is also looked up to by his peers due to his hierarchy position, but like Downey he always makes sure tasks are being completed while maintaining a friendly relationship with the fellow firefighters. Brian Fultz is viewed as the new guy. As the most recent addition to Shift A, he is often found being made the butt of most harmless jokes. He takes the jokes like a good sport and treats them as if a type of initiation. Lasky, Brandt, Howells, Sales, and Leazenby are perceived to be some
of the bigger jokesters of the group. Whether cracking jokes from the “Blue Collar
Comedy Tour” movie or attempting to catch a mouse with a cake pan in the station they
are always looking for a way to include some fun into their careers. The unique
connections displayed by these individuals are obvious to any person entering the station.

According to *The Firefighter’s Handbook* a firefighter is defined as “a member of
a fire department who fights fires,” but within each fire department a type of hierarchy
exists (26). There are several different titles of firefighters exhibited by a single
department. The different rankings at the Purdue University Fire Department include
Fire Chief, Assistant Chief, Captains, and Firefighters (*Policies*). Each ranking has a
specific description and uniform requirement. The different rankings and attire of these
individuals reveal insight into the relationships shared by these people.

The position of a firefighter entails that the person must be willing and ready to
control and suppress fires. They need to be willing to make available all of their services
to the entire Purdue University community, and surrounding community fire departments.
Also, firefighters are responsible for maintaining the upkeep of all the apparatuses. They
must make sure that all equipment on each apparatus is working as well. They are to
complete any other tasks assigned to them by any of the chiefs. The uniform that must be
worn at work by firefighters includes black shoes, dark socks, navy blue pants, black or
dark blue belt, and a Purdue University Fire Department t-shirt or sweatshirt. A majority
of the firefighters hired by Purdue University maintain the title of firefighter.

Captains are a higher rank than firefighters. They have the same obligations as an
Assistant Chief, but they must complete any tasks ordered by an assistant chief. They are
required to be able to do the same things that all firefighters must do too. Captains are to
aide Assistant Chiefs and assume responsibilities if the Assistant Chief is absent. They supervise all training and maintenance completed by the department. Their uniforms are the same as the firefighters. Several other components go into the description of Captains, but these are the major factors Captains are accountable for within this department (Policies).

Assistant Chiefs are in control of their shift unless the Fire Chief is present. The Assistant Chief needs to be ready to uphold authority over their shift. They need to be ready to convey any information needed to the Fire Chief. They are in charge of keeping all property of the fire department in good condition. If repairs are needed, it is their duty to see that they are done. Assistant Chiefs display an authority role over their shift and need to be able to discipline any firefighters that violate and rules or regulations. The Assistant Chief is on duty with his shift at all times, unless an absence prevents him from being at the station. Assistant Chiefs are dressed in the same uniform as firefighters, except for their fire shirts must be navy blue as well (Policies).

The Fire Chief holds the most responsibility of the fire department. He is responsible for making sure his department abides by the rules and perform their duties. He is responsible for the budget, training, schedules, approving the station, salary, and must be on twenty-four hour call. Fire Chiefs are responsible for running the station. Generally the Fire Chief is dressed entirely in black, denoting his authority figure role. Although the Fire Chief is not responsible for being at the station at all times, he upholds the most power within the station (Policies).

All of these roles play an effect on the close bond the firefighters all share. The positive environment displayed by the firefighters after setting foot into the station
instantly comforts one. A person would never think hierarchy exists in this station. The only obvious sign of hierarchy is the apparel being worn by different individuals. The Assistant Chief treats all of his peers just the same. All of the firefighters show respect for and obey the Assistant Chief, but they treat him exactly the same as all the other firefighters on the shift. When Assistant Chief, Chip Flahive, was interviewed about his fellow workers, he responded, “I love them. I wouldn’t get rid of anyone. Everyone has an asset and is necessary.” Flahive also said, “I don’t have a problem with anyone and I think everyone else would say the same thing.” All of these firefighters act as if they are family. They treat all the same way they would like to be treated in return. Everyone shows the utmost respect for one another and expects the same in return.

Another factor that affects the relationships of the Purdue University firefighters is the fact that they are career firefighters as opposed to volunteer firefighters. Career firefighters spend a larger majority of their time at the fire station with fellow firefighters than do volunteer firefighters (Sullivan 11-4). The abundant amount of extra time career firefighters spend together allows for their relationships within the station to become much more solid and structured than those of volunteer firefighters. The firefighters at Purdue work a “Detroit 3-4” schedule. This schedule entails that they work one twenty-four hour shift, have a twenty-four hour time period off, return for another twenty-four hour shift, take another twenty-four hour time period off, finally return for another twenty-four shift, and then take four days (ninety six hours) off from the station. The fact that career firefighters spend several days a week with one another allows for closer bonds to form between that group of people.
Different issues associated with firefighting also affect their relationships. An obvious concern dealing with being a firefighter is the possibility of death as a result of fighting fires. Quite possibly the largest concern among firefighters should be the topic of heat stress. A survey done in 1998 showed that forty six percent of firefighter deaths were a result of heat stress (Firefighter’s 105). An article written by Raul A. Angulo mentions the seriousness of heat stress. He describes heat stress as

an increase in human body temperature and metabolism caused by physical exertion and/or a heated environment which can lead to exhaustion, mental confusion, disorientation, dehydration, loss of consciousness, heart attack, stroke, and other fatal illnesses. (122)

Purdue’s Fire Department also deals with heat stress, primarily in the summer. While fighting fires, the firefighters work at intervals. Every fifteen to twenty minutes the firefighters take turns going into the environment that is on fire. After their interval they visit rehabilitation stations, where they sit in air conditioning and drink water, in the hopes of helping to prevent heat stress (Lasky). Because the department deals with an issue as serious as heat stress, the firefighters are more than willing to help one another. They do not want to see one of their fellow workers die or become seriously injured. This brings the firefighters closer together by trying their best to work to prevent the occurrence of heat stress.

Another important factor for the close friendships associated with these firefighters is the recruiting standards. Purdue’s Fire Department requires their firefighters to be at least eighteen years old, must have a high school diploma and Indiana E.M.T. certification, be able to pass educational and physical tests, and be interviewed by
Firefighters also require a lot of skills. A major skill firefighters must possess is the ability to think fast and clearly. When in a fire there is no time to think about different possibilities. They need to be able to be responsible and realize the importance of their job. They need to be extremely brave in order to enter an unknown situation and ready to take risks (Orr 14-7). Fire Departments must also be extremely particular when hiring firefighters. This is a profession where quality is the main concern, not quantity. If a fire station hires poor firefighters, problems will arise in the station. The jobs will not be getting done efficiently and the other firefighters will resent the poor firefighter for performing poorly (Gasaway 14-5). These strict standards are important in the relationships between the firefighters of Purdue because each of the firefighters is responsible for their fellow workers lives (Orr, 17). This huge responsibility is another reason that these firefighters seem to display an image of family members as opposed to merely fellow workers. They take pride in the standards required and work hard to ensure that every member of the station upholds those standards. They all get along due to sharing a common interest and love for firefighting. They appreciate the standards that go into becoming the best fire station they can be.

Firefighters are needed for other services than just fighting fires. They are responsible for interacting with the general public and supplying them with information. Firefighters give tours of the fire station and emphasize safety tips to the public. The fire department deals with students on daily basis. These firefighters offer fire safety tips such as never leaving unattended objects burning and never overload electrical units. They advise people to check their smoke detectors twice a year and never attempt to fight a fire. Also, making escape routes of homes and buildings is vital (“Purdue”). Another
important service Purdue’s Fire Department provides is their Emergency Medical Services (EMS). By providing this service they are able to save more lives and perform more medical procedures. Due to the firefighters also being emergency medical technicians (EMT) they are able to aide patients in need at a scene of a fire. As EMT’s they hold many more responsibilities. They need to ensure safety, be sure that all equipment is sterile, be aware of all the functions of all the EMS equipment, and maintain all EMS training requirements required by the state of Indiana (Firefighter’s 651-3). Their responsibility to the public at Purdue University forces them to work even harder to maintain strong friendships. The firefighters train together and prepare information together in order to better serve their community.

The relationships between the firefighters at Purdue University are some of the strongest friendships displayed by any group of people. They are forced not only to work with each other, but are also forced to live with each other. They make the extra effort to work hard at their friendships to ensure that they are genuine. When in the line of duty there is no time to fight or be worrying about problems with a fellow employee. The firefighters are forced to push aside any differences that occur in order to do their job correctly. The fact that this group of individuals must get along well in order to perform their job to the fullest makes them value each others friendships. Shift A is a family. They encounter problems here and there throughout the years, but there is never a problem that is too big to deal with. They trust each other with their own lives day in and day out, and risk their lives for others everyday and expect nothing in return. They do their job because they love what they are doing and are proud to be helping the people of their community.
Works Cited


“Purdue University Fire Department.” *Physical Facilities* 23 July 2004. Purdue University. 5 Nov. 2004 <http://www.adpc.purdue.edu/PhysFac/fire/Welcome.html>.