Taking the Heat

Who is a firefighter? The dictionary defines a firefighter as “a person whose work is putting out fires.” I define a firefighter as a brave person who fights fires to save other people’s lives. When I think of firefighters I think of a group of people with a special bond, a comradeship in a sense, which connects them on a whole different level. Firefighters seem to have an instant respect toward each other, and their work. Everyone has their own definition, but I believe that firefighters are true heroes who are needed everywhere by everyone.

I intend to study the subculture of firefighters, and use the Purdue University Fire Department as my fieldsite. The fire department is located in West Lafayette, Indiana on Purdue University’s campus at 1250 Third Street.

The reasons I have chosen to study firefighters as a subculture are endless. Ever since the horrible tragedy that occurred on September 11, 2001, I have gained a completely different admiration for firefighters. I see them as brave people who endure horrible situations just to save other people. Firefighters seem to be some of the friendliest people in our society. I want to find out if firefighters are as friendly as they come off to be. I would like to be able to see what they go through on a daily basis. I want to be able to understand why people chose to become firefighters and why they risk their lives everyday for people they may have never met. I find the firefighting subculture very interesting, but also a subject in which I lack some knowledge.

My first encounter at the Purdue campus fire department was a positive experience. I visited the station on Tuesday, September 21 during the firefighters lunch break. They were extremely warm and welcoming from the moment I walked into the
The firefighters explained that they were full time firefighters who work twenty four hour shifts on a “Detroit 3-4” schedule. I noticed that the firefighters were relatively hyper due to the fact that they had just returned to the fire station after having their previous four days off. They claimed that they usually calm down after the first day back. At lunch time, a group of the firefighters, one female and six males, gathered in their kitchen and prepared hot dogs for lunch. They gave the impression of being one big and happy family, like brothers and sisters.

Instantly I became aware of the fact that all of the firefighters were similarly dressed, wearing either maroon or navy blue shirts paired with navy blue pants. The Assistant Chief was dressed in a navy blue shirt and navy blue pants. The Deputy Chief was dressed completely in black. He wore a black, button down, dress short sleeved shirt with black pants. The Deputy Chief seemed to get along with all the other firefighters. There did not seem to be any issue with his superior job title. He was just another firefighter during lunch at the time I was there to observe.

After lunch, they gathered in the living room area and sat in their reclining chairs. The colors of the recliners alternated maroon and hunter green. The chairs were placed around the light grayish colored cinder blocked walls that bordered the room. The décor consisted of mainly firefighter memorabilia, including firefighter helmets and red fire trucks. The carpet was gray with specks of maroon and hunter green. As they sat in their chairs they watched WLFI Channel 18 news at noon on their big screen television. As soon as the news was over a soap opera appeared on the screen and the television was shut off automatically. They then resorted to either reading the Wall Street Journal or
conversing with each other about things happening on the campus. The firefighters gave no impression of being in a hurry. They seemed to be enjoying taking their time and relaxing.

The entire time I was around the firefighters different names were flying everywhere in the room. A mixture of nicknames and real names surrounded everyone in the room. Chip, Tater, and Dog were a few examples of nicknames. I was unclear who was who because they were constantly referring to each other by different names. The main people at the station who I should interview would include the Deputy Chief and the Assistant Chief. Any other firefighters who would be willing to be interviewed would also be good interviewees, but I would first have to figure out who was who.

An issue that may arise with studying firefighters as a subculture would be the fact that some firefighters will be extremely serious about their occupation. If I were to say something wrong, a firefighter might become extremely upset or offended. Other problems include being able to observe the firefighters with the same shift every time. Since they work different shifts I may have to observe a different group of firefighters than I observed this time. I will have to figure out a schedule of the days the same firefighters work. Also, if they would be called to a fire in the middle of my observation session, my session would have to be cut short due to their need to leave the station promptly. Most of the problems with studying this subculture could be prevented or could be worked out through compromise.

I think people generally have positive biases towards firefighters. They can be described as positive role models, people who want to help other people, and are personable. A negative assumption about firefighters would be the idea that all
firefighters were men. Generally the subculture does consist of mostly men, but not always. A negative bias some people have held against firefighters was the idea that they chose to become a firefighter because they lack intelligence. A person is not required to be very intelligent in order to become a firefighter. They can also be associated with being drinkers. By studying the firefighters, some if not all of these biases will either be shown true or shown to have been misconceptions.

Firefighters like everyone else are real people. They need to be understood. One needs to take the time to get to really know a firefighter before making judgment on a firefighter. Whether people look at them as brave heroes or people who could not get any other job, they are people like everyone else. They are not necessarily defined by their subculture. They just simply take part in their subculture.