

The life of a Volunteer Firefighter

When I was a young boy around the age of seven, I remember riding around in the passenger seat of the Sullivan fire trucks watching my dad and the rest of the firefighters put out fires and respond to emergencies. The memory that stands out the most was a fully involved structure fire in Sorrento. I remember it was nighttime, I was sitting there in the tanker with the flames from the fire lighting up the outside like it was daytime. I remember every year the department planning and celebrating Sullivan Daze, I was too young to appreciate the amount of time it took to plan such things but soon enough, I would find out.

Fast forward fourteen years, now twenty-one and living life as I knew it. I decided to get involved with the fire department since I have watched my family be involved with it as long as I can remember. I joined in 2010. When I joined, I had missed the start date of the fire academy by a month and had to wait an entire year before I could go through the academy. I spent the year learning from the members and the older generation. I was often reminded that the best thing an old firefighter can teach a young firefighter is “how to become an old firefighter.” I went to the meetings; did the in-house training and any outside training I could be a part of to be of help to the town of Sullivan. Finally in 2011 I was able to be enrolled in the Hancock County Fire Academy. This was a 6-month commitment every other weekend (about 233 hours) to learn the basics of interior firefighting and to become a well-rounded interior firefighter. After the academy was finished, I took the Pro-Board Firefighter 1&2 test to become certified. After the fire academy I enrolled in my basic EMT class. The class was two days a week for 6 months. I drove to Bangor in the evening and

would get home late and go to work the next day. It was a very mentally draining class because it was extremely fast paced and had a lot of information to learn. Fastforward 6 months I am done with the class and studying every spare second of my day to be able to pass the National Registered Emergency Medical Technician test. I spent about two months with a book in my hand before I took the test. Finally, I scheduled my test in Bangor and went and passed it on my first try.

I spent the next 9 years running medical calls, car accidents, structure fires, and rescues for the town of Sullivan. Leaving the house at all hours of the night, even on holidays, because tragedies don't take days off. Whether it be pulling animals out of burning buildings, or retrieving victims out of wreckage, most of the time you know the person because it is happening in a small town. It is part of the job so eventually you learn to cope with it. Even after completing the academy, I continued my education by taking part in various trainings. I shadowed my Captain, Bruce Munger, hoping I could learn everything he knew about fighting fires and become the kind of firefighter he expected me to be.

Every year the demand and responsibility of being a firefighter increased, spending more and more time away from home and having new jobs added to our "job description." If all you wanted to do was join the fire department and be a part of something, then it was not too bad, but if you wanted to be trained in all aspects of the job then you really needed to invest some time. Some of the trainings are annual which you are required to do every year as a refresher, such as bloodborne pathogens, fire extinguisher, traffic control and CPR/First Aid. Some other trainings that are optional that I took part in was the S130/S190, which is a wildland firefighting course. This training, along with doing the pack test for my red card every year enabled me to go out of state to fight wildland fires as a "call when needed" firefighter

for the Maine forest service. I had been to Canada and Colorado for assignments, both with completely different experiences and opportunities for me to learn and bring the skills back to teach to my department. I would go to Rockland every year to an EMS conference to be able to get the CEH that I would need to keep my EMS license. I took part in school bus extrication, hybrid car extrication, firefighter self-rescue classes, Tactical Combat Casualty Care, and many more classes. I have traveled to New Jersey to get my vehicle extrication Technician level which helped me understand stabilizing vehicles as well as quicker, more efficient ways to extricate patients from vehicles after accidents.

In 2021 I earned my Advanced Emergency Medical Technician license, which unlocked a whole new scope of practice I was able to use. This allowed me to better care for the people of Sullivan and surrounding towns. Having my AEMT allowed me to give certain drugs and to administer IV fluids when needed. I continued to build from this foundation and shortly after this I was trained in Advanced First Aid for Operational K9's. This training I was extremely passionate about because I have always been an animal lover and I was now trained in helping Police K9's.

Now it is 2023 and Sullivan has an ambulance, thanks to Jeremy Ogden of Hancock, who set up the service and got it up and running. We are now capable of transporting patients to the hospital. We run a "shift" schedule in the evenings which allows us to have one Firefighter/EMT, and one driver available. Although we are a volunteer department, we are able to pay the members who take part in the shift schedule a small amount, which would never be enough to survive on, but helps with incentive to show up. This shift schedule means that when you are on the schedule, you are committed to showing up if we were to get a call. In exchange for giving up your night to be on shift,

you would earn \$32.24 for that night. Some nights would be quiet, and you would not have to leave home, but some nights it would be a blizzard outside and you could be called out 5 times that night for various reasons, you never really know.

Even though this is my story, there are many more like it everywhere. All over the country there is a need for volunteers and people who have a real passion to make a difference. It would not matter what town you go to, there are always people like me behind the scenes giving up so much of their time all because it just needs to be done.

Having been a part of this department for 13 years and seeing how things have changed since the first day I joined, I sometimes wonder what the next 20 years will bring. I wonder if I will still be a part of this or will the volunteer life die out and require towns to have a paid fire department. Every year it gets tougher to find people to do the job and I know we will not be able to do this forever.

My grandfather was a founding member of Sullivan Fire Department, and my father has been a member for over 30 years, now myself as a 3rd generation firefighter, I hope one day to see my son Kade who is almost 3 years old follow in my shoes and continue the tradition.

The intent of this letter was not to highlight my career as a firefighter, but to bring awareness to everyone what it is like to be a firefighter in this day and age. I hope everyone can appreciate what volunteer firefighters do for their towns and know that even though keeping fire departments current and equipment up to date is expensive, at the end of the day many of us volunteer countless hours of our lives to be able to keep our town safe. If reading this letter has sparked an interest and you would like to give back to your community,

go to your local fire department no matter what town it is, they can use your support. It is not a matter of IF you have time, because none of us volunteers have the time, it is, however, a matter of doing the job because it needs to be done.

Thank you for reading this and remember to support your local fire department.

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