Battling Blazes

Meet two female firefighters who risk their lives to save others.

By Inez Prieto

Firefighters must be prepared to tackle the most dangerous situations.

Fighting fires is no easy job! It takes strength, determination, and bravery. No one knows that better than Sheila Leahy and Shannon Mueller. Sheila has worked for the fire department in Boston, Massachusetts, for more than five years. Shannon has worked for more than 10 years as

a firefighter and paramedic for the city of San Diego, California.

The two women discuss the danger—and rewards—of doing their job.

What kind of tasks do firefighters perform?
Sheila: We put out fires, but there's more to the job than that. One of our responsibilities is to clean up hazardous materials. We also receive medical training.

Shannon: We're trained to protect buildings too, so it's not just about fighting fires, it's about making sure buildings are safe. We're also trained to do search and rescue.

What requirements are needed to become a firefighter?
Shannon: I went to the fire academy for four months of physical and safety training. I also had to pass a civil service test. [A civil service test is a written test that you must pass if you want to get a city-run job, like fighting fires or delivering mail.] The entire process took about two years to complete. Both men and women go through the same process.

Sheila: Our fire academy program lasts 14 weeks. Part of the program is learning practical skills like how to raise a ladder and climb one. There's also classroom work where we learn about the science of fires. [The science of fires includes how fires start and how they spread.]

Shannon Mueller has been a firefighter for more than 10 years.

What made you decide that you wanted to become a professional firefighter?

Sheila: My dad was a firefighter. As a kid, I didn't think being a firefighter was realistic for a woman. But in high school, I saw a woman go by on a fire truck. I grabbed my dad and said, "Who's that?" He told me to finish school and get a [different kind of] job, but now, he couldn't be prouder of me.

Shannon: I was a sheriff's deputy for eight years. I specialized in search-and-rescue missions. I really liked that part of the job, and the fire department was taking over that program.

Do male firefighters treat you differently because you're a woman?
Shannon: No, we're all firefighters regardless of our genders. Everyone's expected to do the same work: driving the engines, maintaining equipment and tools, all the way down to preparing meals and cleaning the bathrooms at the station house.

Firefighting can be a very dangerous profession, so how do you cope with the pressure of your job?
Sheila: Working out helps me [deal with the stress]. It also helps to have a sense of humor. It's a way for firefighters to keep things light. I also don't dwell on the negative [things] . . . I'm not going to let danger stop me.

Shannon: The other firefighters and I talk about things that happen on the job. Sharing humor with each other helps too. Having a positive attitude and maintaining your composure is important. We train and prepare so that bad things won't happen.

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