

## **Reluctant Heroes:** **Growing Up In A Firefighter Family**

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*This article refers to firemen, in the male gender, not as a blatant discounting of the tremendous contributions of women to this honorable profession, but based on the time in which this recollection occurs—a time before women in the department were commonplace.*

Growing up in a firefighter family, the experience is atypical at best. Unless you also hail from such a background, it is difficult to fully understand the immense pride, affinity for bagpipes and “Danny Boy,” and the full effect of 9/11 upon the “brothers” and their families. There is also a strong sense that there is no more noble a cause than the sacrifices these men and women make, every day, for the rest of us. It is a job—a calling—beyond compare, causing even some rivalry between cop and firefighter families as to who has the more hazardous role.

Despite the inherent dangers, I would suspect that most children from such families have a similar story to tell. The risks are rarely, if ever, discussed outside of a “please bring Daddy home safely” insertion into dinnertime prayer. Absolutely, there is a particular type of persona attached to this type of hero—one that typically prefers to stay in the shadows, doing their courageous job without much external notice.

As a child, I never feared for my father’s safety. He was invincible to me, and he did a very convincing job of assuring me that “firemen don’t burn” by running his finger repeatedly through a burning candle. One of my other sisters, the next in line after me in our rug-rat clan of “Irish twins,” recalls having more concerns than I. But that was not my feeling. I never doubted Daddy coming home. He promised.

I wonder now, as I look back on my father’s 25 years of public service, how my mother, or any spouse, manages the reality that every goodbye could potentially be the last. Yet, as it was reinforced in my upbringing, it becomes par for the course and an unspoken part of the package. It does, however, explain the staunch rule of our household: You never leave or enter the house without a hug and kiss to everyone there.

When Dad speaks of firefighting, as is typical for an Irishman and their larger-than-life stories, you are simply on the edge of your seat. His vivid recollections bring you as close to the fire as you can be without danger, fear, feeling the pain or burning through your clothing, choking on the smoke, facing death, or fighting the pitch darkness as you feel your way, on your knees, through a section of burning building. Embellishment? That is only widespread in fishing. Firemen tell it like it is—or was, when they *will* talk about it, that is. In fact, much of what they have experienced they refuse to discuss, protecting us, once again, from the gruesome part of their everyday work.

My FDNY Battalion Chief brother, Jimmy, assures me that my Dad's time with the department brought a legendary status that I could not even begin to fathom. Heroism beyond compare, so easily dismissed from this gentle, soft-spoken, and humble man who just turned 70—one who had what it took to meet the “Red Devil” with a welcomed stare and a fighter's stance. But, again, most firefighters are this sort of man or woman. “Regular Joe” types, not caught up with ego, need for acknowledgement or credit, or anything other than “the job” and the camaraderie that comes with it that fuels most of them.

I was certainly too young to remember the building collapse in 1966 that had my father pinned, completely immobilized, for 1 ½ hours with six or seven other firemen in what a New York newspaper deemed, “The Miracle on 46th Street.” Just a month earlier, twelve firemen were killed in a similar situation, but in this instance, all survived. This just reminds me how easily I could have been a firefighter orphan—not just then, but any time my Dad was on duty. Yet, I was oblivious to this until probably 9/11. Or, at least it didn't truly hit home until then.

I was, I admit, more concerned for my brother and cousin as they began their service in the department, and especially on that catastrophic day as we frantically attempted calls to determine their whereabouts right after the attacks began. Even prior to the Twin Towers, I knew that they—these mere mortals whose flaws I readily saw while growing up—were not the caliber of my indestructible and heroic father, the mighty Jim Costello. They AREN'T invincible, and I had long ago learned that I, too, can pass my finger through a candle.

The Christmas immediately following 9/11 was, as was probably the case for many Americans, a holiday that was eerily absent of the traditional joyous spirit. While appreciation and love for family and friends was certainly heightened, “celebration” was low-keyed—more spiritual, reflective, and introspective. With a nod or a deliberate look, we communicated our mutual understanding of why this Christmas was different. And it was okay for it to be different. We'd get through it—in time. We, fortunately, still had each other. Death was around us, but not within our home. It was a time to feel tremendously blessed despite the sadness we additionally felt.

Healing time within our country differed depending on the level of connection, loss, and one's ability to move on relatively unaffected by what remained. For firefighter families, in particular, 9/11 was present well after the first year. For some of us, it is still not over.

In the immediate aftermath of New York and Washington, I suspect most people feared for the mental health of loved ones who served as firefighters, cops, or other rescue workers. To this day, I worry about my older brother, Jimmy. Sure, he is a solid and tough Irish guy, but he has suffered more personal losses than I could ever imagine in a lifetime. Top that off with his support of widows on The Hill at hearings and, as a newly “made” Battalion Chief, his assignment to co-write the city’s 9/11 Report. Of course, he rarely, if ever, wants to talk about any of it.

Maybe this is the firefighter way, the Irish way, the generally non-emotional sharing of men, or something he specifically learned from Dad. In fact, I can only recall my father crying three times in my entire life. He cried, silently, with his head in his hands, when my grandmother passed away. Once, I witnessed him discuss with my mother a particularly disturbing experience in a fire—one that he never would have wanted me, then a very young child, to overhear as he shared his description and distress over what he found. And finally, on the second Christmas after 9/11, our entire family stood or sat in silence as a news documentary revisited the life of a fallen Battalion Chief—a friend of my father’s. As I saw his aging eyes well up next to me, the only appropriate action was to reach out and firmly hold his hand—looking straight ahead so as to not violate his stoic need to grieve privately, though painfully aware of his rarely shared tears. No words were necessary, and our normative behavioral history continued.

In the few times that my brother allowed a brief discussion about 9/11, I learned to be careful with my wording. Jimmy was clear and even, at times, belligerent, changing the subject that I so strongly felt we needed to talk about to less heavy and safer topics. In particular, in the gospel according to Jim, the word “hero” is, apparently, uncomfortable to many of these firefighters. Even if the term fits, I gather that this is a combination of the firefighter personality and survivor’s guilt. When attending funerals preoccupied off-duty time for two years or more, these folks had their fill of that word. They never asked for it.

And so, while I respectfully won’t use that word when I speak directly to a firefighter, I refuse to stop calling or thinking of these men and women as heroes. Until 9/11, they were mostly unsung ones. Perhaps, if nothing else, it reminds us of what they give us each and every day. We tend to only notice, however, when we lose one...or more.

I always thought that firemen don’t burn. That is what I was told, from a very reliable source—the mighty Jim Costello. That is what I believed, what consoled me and allowed me to peacefully sleep as a young child while my father fought the Red Devil. I now know differently, as we all do, that our most recent goodbye could be our last—truthfully offering some food for thought in how we deal with all relationships in our lives.

At the striking of tomorrow’s fifth anniversary of 9/11, my reflection is bittersweet. I am filled with gratitude that, while I know many people who lost friends and loved ones, I myself did not lose someone dear to me. As I sit here in the safety of my home office, pecking away my thoughts on a keyboard, there are those who possess a courage that is

not within me—those who are willing to put their lives on the line as firefighters, cops, and soldiers. These men and women don't seek media attention, recognition, the high paying job, or bonuses for increased productivity.

These people do what they do because it is within them—and we, the people, are lucky that it is. Heroes. Reluctant or not for them to wear that badge, they are heroes because of the types of people they are—not solely for the form of service they chose, but that they are willing to sacrifice for the rest of us, giving up their lives if that becomes the consequence. And so, on the eve of 9/11... I say, “thank you.”

Dad, Jimmy, Stephen, and all the rest of you—I will never call you a hero to your face.