

A MOTHER'S JOURNEY: NAVIGATING VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTING AND MOTHERHOOD

May 7, 2024

By Rick Markley

Like many over the age of 45, Sandra Sokol's introduction to the fire service came from the 1970s TV show *Emergency!* Like many women, she juggled a career, motherhood, and a divorce. Unlike many women, she also threw herself headlong into the volunteer fire service while taking on all those other responsibilities.

"I remember being very little, kindergarten or first grade, and having the fire department come to the school and me telling a firefighter that I was going to be a firefighter one day — and him laughing at me and telling me girls could not be firefighters," Sokol says. "That did not go over very well."

How wrong he was. Sokol now serves as a volunteer with two departments in northern Virginia. On one, she is assistant fire chief, the first female to reach that rank in the department's 50-year history. That department responds to more than 200 calls per month, with about 80% being EMS runs.

She is also captain and president of a volunteer rural/suburban fire company that runs about 40 calls per month. Most of those incidents, she says, are fairly significant.

In honor of Mother's Day, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) sat down with Sokol to dig deeper into what it means to be both a volunteer firefighter and a mother.

Describe your introduction into the volunteer fire service.

Because of that early experience, I went about my life thinking I could not be a firefighter until my junior year of college. The local fire department had added apartments/bunkrooms on the second level; they were on campus soliciting for live-in members. I stopped to talk to them and found out that girls could definitely be firefighters.

How has your journey in the volunteer fire service progressed?

After college, I moved to a new state to start my career as a teacher. I did join the local volunteer fire department, but I was not very active as I was trying to learn my job. I moved again and joined another local fire department and was more active, but since I did not hold any certifications I mainly served as an assistant. It was around this time I started my EMS certification journey. I got certified as an EMT and then moved again, and, yes, joined another volunteer fire department. I quickly became very involved as an EMS provider and then took my first formal fire classes.

I joined one of my current fire departments in 1999 and went on to get additional certifications. I also eventually took a position as the program director and instructor for a high school EMT/firefighter program, which I ran for over 10 years.

When I left the high school program, I was approached by a volunteer fire department that used to sponsor students for my program and was asked to consider joining. I agreed to help them out as a driver only on the nights I could. That led to becoming a crew leader, then lieutenant, then president, and now I hold the rank of captain.

What is your day job?

I am a curriculum instructional designer for a corporate company. I retired from being a special education teacher in December 2023.

What does your family/home life look like?

I was married until 2009 and had a son in 2000. He is now a successful young man living in the Midwest.

How has being a volunteer firefighter changed the type of mother you are?

I was able to handle the stress and chaos of being a mom better because I was a firefighter. I also knew how precious life was, so I made sure I enjoyed and cherished every single minute I got with my son growing up and even now as an adult. He is my single greatest achievement in life.

How has being a mother changed the type of volunteer firefighter you are?

Being a mom makes me so much better because I want to make my son proud of me. I am also much more empathetic to parents I encounter on calls because now I understand how it is to be a mom and have those feelings of stress, excitement, terror when your child is sick or hurt.

What coping mechanisms or techniques do you use to keep the things you see as a volunteer firefighter from negatively impacting your role as parent?

When my son was young, my coping mechanism was to do fun things with him. Laugh with him. Do things together and not just have him in his room watching TV or whatever else. We did road trips, played in the dirt and the rain, broke windows in the house playing soccer in the yard and laughing hysterically about it.

When he got older, I would talk to him a little bit about things. I wanted him to realize the world was dangerous and these are things you can do to help protect yourself. He wanted to be a volunteer as well so we would talk about the service and what kind of stress it could bring, but also the joys and that you need healthy ways to deal with the stress.

What advice would you give 15-years-ago Sandra?

Never give up on your dreams. Make them happen somehow, someday. When it comes to the fire service, train, train, train. When things go sideways, it is your training that you will fall on — that training and your instincts with your experience are what will keep you alive. Listen to the old guys; they really do know what this service is all about. While new things are helping make the job a bit easier and safer, it is the basics that do not change and on which you must build your foundation.

What would you say to other mothers thinking about joining a volunteer fire department?

When you join the fire service you truly do join a family. Yes, you have to go through your “probationary” time. But, trust me, you just joined the greatest thing in the world that is so much bigger than you.

As published National Volunteer Fire Council: [A Mother’s Journey: Navigating Volunteer Firefighting and Motherhood - National Volunteer Fire Council \(nvfc.org\)](https://www.nvfc.org/resources/a-mothers-journey-navigating-volunteer-firefighting-and-motherhood)