



FIREFIGHTERS AND EAGLES: A SHARED HEART

by Jada Hudson, M.S., LCPC



Strong, brave, and fierce are adjectives you may use to describe a firefighter. They are also appropriate adjectives to describe an eagle.

For most of us, eagles are a sign of dignity, inspiration, and strength. The bird makes a fitting national symbol of our country. In fact, eagles are so important, when they began facing extinction because of their precarious environment, the country launched a campaign to remedy the situation with a change in attitude towards the environment.

Firefighters also operate in difficult environments, and the ILFFPS is trying to change the negative behaviors and attitudes that exist concerning the need for emotional support within the fire department.

Like eagles, firefighters are worth fighting for. But the similarities don't end there...

Eagles are the only birds that love the storm.

While other birds flee for shelter, eagles anticipate the storm with excitement. As the winds rise, they catch it under their wings and use their frame to lock their wings in a fixed position to stand against the fiercest storm.

Likewise, firefighters anticipate danger and never shrink from it. Instead, they face it head on, using their own unique gifts to weather whatever comes their way. One of these gifts is the ability to bravely face the unknown, especially when they are called to care for community members at their most tragic moments. It is a unique trait I recognize in every firefighter I've ever met and truly comprises the heart of what they do.

However, Tim Grutzius, who is a Regional Coordinator on the peer support team and a lieutenant with the Alsip Fire Department, says that while those are good attributes to have, the same traits can become a detriment to the firefighter with respect to taking care of his/her own behavioral health. "The prevalent culture of the fire service dictates that it is a sign of weakness to admit that a firefighter needs help with respect to behavioral health and therefore would rather suffer in silence than be ostracized by peers," he says. Tim explains that the Illinois Firefighter Peer Support Team was created to enable a shift in this cultural view by assisting brother and sister firefighters in need. Through tireless, proactive means such as education and outreach, ILFFPS has garnered the attention of the firefighters in Illinois, other states, and even the country of Ireland.

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However, Tim feels there is still work to do to make this cultural shift a permanent and lasting mark on the fire service. “Much like the eagle that can soar above the looming storm, the firefighter should always have the courage to take the high road in the face of adversity,” he said. “Firefighters should never hesitate to ask for help, for it is just a phone call or an email away.”

Eagles support their young.

Despite their reputation for ferocity, eagles are protective, patient parents. When it is time for their babies to fly, the eaglets are systematically driven from the nest until they have no choice but to fly. As they take that step off the nest and fall through the air, their mother will catch them on her back if they fail to take flight on their own. Again and again she will repeat the process until they are able to soar independently. This illustrates the patience and selflessness that we see from leaders at the Fire Academy as well as the Peer Support Team. When fellow firefighters “fall”, others are there to catch them, train them, support them and make sure they have all the skills they need to succeed in life, no matter how long it takes.

Eagles never give up living.

Many people believe that when an eagle becomes old or injured they will retreat to a mountaintop by themselves. They will shed their beak, talons and feathers and over a five-month period they will regrow their removed body parts to regenerate and extend their life. Only in their lowest condition, after shedding their weakest parts, are they able to regrow stronger, more resilient body parts to complete their life’s journey. This is representative of the Florian Program for firefighters at Rosecrance. As one patient said, “The Florian program is like a “reset” button. It is a place to begin again.

Just as eagles retreat to the mountaintop, firefighters enter the inpatient program at Rosecrance to find support beyond what the Peer team can provide. There, only after shedding the weakest part of themselves, can they find the tools they need to renew their body and spirit and emerge stronger than ever. In the midst of their brothers on the force, they can engage in self-care and spend several weeks developing the tools they need to help them with their addictions so they can continue all the good work of a firefighter.

So while they may not have wings, firefighters have much in common with our brave friend, the eagle. They show us the greatest example not only of bravery and selflessness, but also of self-care and resiliency.

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