

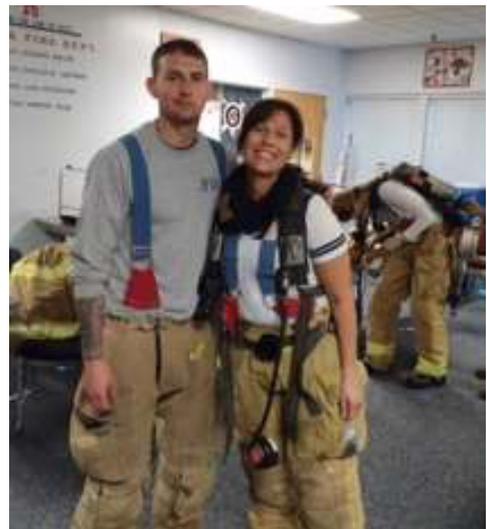
Lessons From A Firefighter Therapist Training Day April 18, 2015

When Sarah Gura asked me to join her and Cody for a special firefighter training day at the Aurora Fire Department for just us FPS therapists, I was expecting more of a demonstration and lecture about smoke and fire. Or, at least, that's what I thought was going to happen. I never realized what an emotionally and physically exhausting, yet rewarding experience I was about to have.

FAMILIAR TERRITORY

It was a bittersweet experience to have Matt Acuff as one of our instructors. I have known Matt and his family for years. He attended the high school where I recently worked and I have watched him grow and reach his life milestones. As a teenager, he was a very respectful, goal-oriented, serious high school student. Now, here he was, all grown up, married with a child and an important part of the department. Where does the time go?

Then, as we were waiting to start the training, I noticed some names written all along the wall. When I asked about it, I was told that everyone who had ever worked for the Aurora Fire Department was on that wall. I looked closer and saw the name of my brother, Gerald Hudson, who had served the Aurora Fire Department in the late 1970's. Sadly, he passed away last summer when I was halfway through my FPS training, so he was never to know that I was to learn more about his profession. He had always talked about his time in the fire department and referred to it as one of his proudest achievements. I posed for a picture with his name and couldn't have been prouder of my late big brother.



Here's Matt and I before the training began!



GEARING UP

As we went through the FIT test, I was fitted with the firefighter mask and the SCBA. Before long, I was breathing through it like a pro, without feeling claustrophobic or light-headed. I was remarkably calm through it all, again thinking that we were just experiencing the gear, but would not necessarily be using it as a firefighter does. Ignorance is bliss!

Now people who know me know I have many talents but they also know I am mechanically challenged and have no sense of direction. I joke that the GPS in my head is broken and it's a challenge for me to change a light bulb. Unfortunately, I was about to learn that two important things firefighters need are a good sense of direction and mechanical aptitude!

Our teachers began telling us how to put our gear on. I was impressed with how complicated it was— and to

think they have to do it in split seconds to save lives! This buckles there, that snaps here...getting the gear on was a challenge for me. Everything needs to be done in the right order at the right place on the body. The best part about putting on turnout gear is that there is an alarm that goes off if your body is still for longer than 30 seconds. The best way to turn off the alarm is to wiggle your butt. I did the hokey pokey a lot that day as I struggled to figure out the metropolis of straps all over my body. But finally, finally, I was standing there with the air tank on my back, head to toe in protective gear, feeling a little like a space man.

Then the firefighters taught us how to “dump our tanks”. This is what you do so you can crawl through tight spaces. You take off the tanks, always on the left side, and pull it through as you wriggle through the tight areas. We practiced this in the classroom, wriggling through a maze of chairs. I had a good giggle when I found myself on my back like a turtle, struggling to turn over, but felt better when I saw Sarah out of the corner of my eye looking every bit the turtle that I was!

The hard part for me, about “dumping my tanks”, was getting them back on again.(I told you I wasn’t mechanically inclined right?) While Sarah and Cody had no problem here, I fumbled quite a bit to position everything the way it needed to be. I’m pretty much all thumbs when it comes to that sort of thing but Chris and Matt were very patient in helping me redo my mistakes.

It was evident now we weren’t just going to be learning in the classroom! That’s ok, I thought to myself, I think I can handle whatever physical challenges await me. I had some confidence in my strength. I consider myself an active person, and work out 3-4 times a week. I even have taken “hot yoga” for years. Surely exercising in a 105 degree room in 50 percent humidity would prepare me for the heat of a fire and keep me calm, right?

THE TRAINING FACILITY

We took off our gear and all piled in and drove over to the firefighting training facility. The bad part about taking off my gear is that I had to put it on again! Sigh. Thanks for the help again, Chris and Matt, I guess I am your special project today Then it was time to do the obstacle course with just our turnout gear on.

Now I have to say that if I knew what was coming my way, I would have said no to the invitation. Navigating a maze in the dark in complicated gear I had to take on and off is hardly something I would expect myself to do well. However, as I began to worry about what was about to happen, I realized I had to reframe the situation, just as I help my clients to do. Maybe at this point in time, I didn’t have a choice in what I had to do, but neither do the firefighters who have to face unknown situations every day. I could do this for the firefighters, just as they would do it for me.

The training facility had an interesting maze of big moving cans, dangling wires, and small spaces you literally had to dive into. Now, I started to have fun. So what if I couldn’t put my gear on, at least I could maneuver in it! I could feel my strength letting me accomplish things and I was having a great time. I wish we could have done it many more times because I was sure I could get even faster at it. I was getting a great adrenaline rush from the whole experience! But then, just when I was starting to have fun....they had us put those damn tanks on again to do the obstacle course in pitch darkness!

Air tanks on my back means I have to dump them when I go through the tight spaces, which means I have to take them off, which means I have to put them back on again....damn! It had now been a good half hour since I learned how to do that....what buckle goes where? My fumble fingers were beginning to shake.

Then they closed up the room and it was time to do this like a real firefighter—in the dark. Now in the first run through, we followed each other quite closely. In the second one, the firefighters told us to leave more room between us. Sarah and Chris were the first through the obstacle course and they sped far ahead of me. I was second, followed by Matt and Cody. After I started through, I turned around and looked for Matt and Cody. I stopped and waited, thinking that we were supposed to still have visual contact with our teammates even as we kept our distance. For a while I figured Cody was having trouble with her equipment and I should wait for her. Then I realized they wanted me to keep going. So I did.

Wow, things were so different in the dark. I'm more of a visual learner, so take away my sight and combine it with my trademark sense of direction and you have a recipe for disaster! Even though I had been through the maze before, the broken GPS in my brain gave me no indication of which way to go. I knew I was lost now. Thank God it wasn't a real fire. I would be lost, my crew would be lost...it hit me that this is what my clients face on a regular basis, but they don't get a run through. They enter strange buildings and need to make their way through what they can't see, keeping track of where they are going, and occasionally dumping their tanks and putting them back on. It's truly admirable.

Since the experience, I have talked to other firefighters and they assured me I am not alone. Other firefighters too need extra practice with the gear. When you're in the dark, there are no visual cues to put things back on correctly. A friend of mine who was an Air Force veteran told me that he learned to take a mental image or snapshot of his gear so he could remember what connected to what when he was in the dark. I remembered too how so often my firefighter clients would come to me telling me they felt scared, weak and vulnerable on my couch when they first came to see me. Now I felt like I was on THEIR couch as I slumped down in the gravel outside the training facility feeling angry, vulnerable and humiliated. I'm kind of a perfectionist, and I knew I had fumbled through the exercise, bested by my natural failings and unable to perform as I would have liked. I know I could with more practice, but that wasn't what today was about, I told myself.

I realized too that I am in my late 40's, which for a firefighter is at the top age range. Can I use this as the excuse for why I felt so entirely exhausted and emotional? I remembered how many older clients would tell me of pain and symptoms they would have from the physical demands of their job. Some of them would even "self medicate" with alcohol which would lead to greater problems. I must admit I was beginning to feel the physical strain myself as an old disc injury in my neck began to flare up and limit my mobility. I was feeling a little beat up, but I remember the older firefighters I see would tell me they often felt the same way...exhausted and beaten by their experiences and circumstances. After a hard day, they had to return home to their loving families and muster the energy to play with their children and be there for their spouse. My heart felt in sync with theirs that day. All I wanted to do after this experience was go home and take a nap. But my daughter had not seen me all day and I knew she would want to spend time together. This was just one day for me with a replicated firefighting experience. For real firefighters, this was their "normal" with real lives at stake and danger at every turn.

SMOKE, FIRE AND LESSONS LEARNED

Finally, finally, finally we got to take off the damn turn out gear and learn about smoke and fire. Mentally, I began to relax. I wouldn't have to put that gear on again. Or so I thought.

You guessed it. They told us to suit up for the smoke and fire segment. Damn it! I was so DONE with this gear... once more, I unsuccessfully attempted to dress myself. How ironic that this, my idea of hell, came with heat protection! At least once the presentation began, I finally began to feel I was in my element— a classroom with a lecture! They lit the live fire and I enjoyed listening and learning about how fire burns, how smoke rises, how fire interacts with oxygen and other environments. Matt was an excellent teacher and I was a very attentive student. We took off our gloves and we couldn't believe how hot it was. We were unbelievably protected from the heat. Matt told us that one time it was so hot, his mask melted, but he did not feel the heat. Wow.

This whole experience, while humbling for me on a personal level, exalted me professionally, and I was so grateful for the opportunity. I had learned so much! Before, I had some idea from my clients of what being in a firefighter situation was like but I felt a little bit closer to it now.

What amazed me most was how many simultaneous things firefighters have to worry about. I do think firefighters have to be the most amazing multi-taskers there are. We had only had a few things to keep track of and I myself, had plenty enough trouble with those—putting the tanks on and off, keeping the gear alarm from going off and trying to figure out where I was going in the dark. Real firefighters face so much more, and have to also simultaneously look out for their fellow firefighters, avoid danger themselves, and rescue others all while actively fighting the fire. And if one thing goes wrong... catastrophe!

Also, the whole experience drove home the idea of choice. Firefighters don't get a choice as to where they go, what they will find or what they will be called to help with. They can't "pass" on the call where they may find a burned baby or potentially lose a limb. When Sarah asked me to come along to this training, I had the choice to say no. It wasn't exactly in my job description and I don't ever have to do it again if I don't want to. Not so with the firefighters. That's why they deserve our utmost respect and support in every possible way. They do the job, whatever the job, that is asked of them. They don't have a choice.

Finally, being in that training situation with my fellow FPS counselors, I truly felt the concept of brotherhood that my clients have described and I have learned so much about in my FPS training. Certainly, Cody, Sarah and I now have a bond for having gone through this experience together and at no time were our lives in danger. I can only



FPS Firefighters at the Therapist Training Day (from left to right):
Cody Todd, Sarah Gura, Jada Hudson

imagine how much more intense the feeling would be if we had been the only ones standing between life and death for each other. I do believe that the bond that firefighters forge cannot be replicated anywhere else.

SPECIAL THANKS

Thanks to my fellow FPS therapists for supporting me through this and especially to Matt and Chris for not only for giving us a taste of what it's like to be a firefighter, but also for their kindness and patience in helping me with my gear. I think with ten more tries, I would have had it!

I like to think that Jerry may have been looking down too, and have been proud of his little sister's effort, no matter how clumsy it was. In my thank you correspondence to Chris, he said something that touched my heart. I thanked him for not giving up on me and he in turn, thanked me for what I was doing and for "standing beside his brother and sister firefighters." "You are now my sister," he wrote, and tears filled my eyes. This year, I lost my brother, but I had gained one too.



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