

## **Pride and Ownership: The Love for the Job      Part 5**

### **OUR TWO FAMILIES**

**By Rick Lasky**

The person that coined the phrase “Blood is thicker than water” in an effort to describe the closeness and loyalty that a “Family” has with each other, obviously never got to experience the closeness and loyalty of the American fire service family. Granted, your family at home is going to rank higher when it comes to that way of thinking and rightfully so, but the fire service family has to run a very close second. Nowhere on the face of the earth does there exist another “family” or organization that has the closeness and love for one another that the American fire service has. I know I said love and it sounds mushy, but it’s true. Where else can you go somewhere or anywhere for that matter and see someone wearing a Maltese cross on his or her chest and not feel that closeness instantly. You know what I’m talking about. You’re traveling somewhere, at a wedding, ball game or whatever, and you start talking to someone and as soon as you realize that that person is a firefighter, you feel at ease. It’s as if you’ve known each other for years. Now I also understand that we all have that “crazy” uncle that you don’t want to let out of the house, but the fact still remains that *we are* a very strong family. Again, where else can you have someone in need or having a rough time and see as soon as one of your family members finds out, the help and support starts to line up. Sick kid, family problems, they’re there. There are Fortune 500 companies that would kill for the marketing advantage of the American fire service family. Especially when at times, the American family itself is struggling through divorce, abuse, ugly relations and some of the other challenges facing them. Maybe that’s why you can’t turn the television on without seeing a commercial with a firefighter or fire truck in it. Look at all of the advertising that utilizes the fire service family as a way in. They realize that there is a bond and a trust between the public and the fire service that is second to none. I know it might appear that I’m bragging a little but so what, the fire service deserves it!

## **Defending Our Family**

This is one of those areas we need to drop some gentle reminders about once in a while. It's hard to defend our family from those on the outside when someone on the inside is "slapping" it around in the first place. What I'm referring to is when we hurt each other with what we say about each other and at times what we do sometimes to hurt each other's feelings. I'm not trying to get warm and fuzzy, but aren't we supposed to take care of each other? When all else fails we're suppose to be there for each other "through thick and thin." Just gentle reminders is all. The other area is not allowing anyone to tarnish our image. That means keeping each other in line and coming down on someone when they cross that line. We've got an awesome family but we're human. Once in a while someone is going to make a mistake and that's ok. They're called "on accidents" not "on purposes." But occasionally someone is going to screw up and do one of those "on purposes" when they really should have known better and we need to step up and let them know it's not right. Again, how far do you let someone go to where it hurts us all? Just try to explain to someone from the public how a firefighter could commit arson. Something we read about way to often. That's a difficult task seeing how we're supposed to put them out! Our family is not supposed to break the law.

So how do you work to control it? A lot of it starts by hiring the right people and letting them know just what our expectations are of them. Tell them right away. Tell them that we don't steal, we don't lie and that we don't put up with anyone that betrays our family. Yes it goes back to being a good fire service brother or sister and the whole brotherhood thing again, and that in itself defines a value system that we need to abide by. One where brothers stand by each other, stand up for each other, stand up for the fire service and stand up for our family. It does not however mean that you take advantage of each other and play on the whole brotherhood thing for personal gains especially when you are wrong. Being a brother means I will do everything I can for you, but it also means that you as my brother would never

ask me to do something that would risk my own family's financial security. That I will do what you need but when it comes to hurting my family, you'll understand and be able to reason with that.

Remember, doing the right thing doesn't mean the wrongs things and trying to make them look right. It means doing the right things for the right reasons. And hurting someone's family doesn't make it right.

The good news is there area couple of organizations that do nothing more than promote the brotherhood and thank God they do. During times where in the private sector integrity is a struggle and family values are being thrown aside by some, we have to step up and protect our own. Maybe we ought to let the fire service family serve as a role model for others to follow. I think in many places it already does.

### **Our *First Family***

Our first family, *the one at home*, is where it all has to start. The only way we can build and strengthen our second family or extended family is to work towards building a strong foundation at home. Without a foundation, a strong base, our values system begins to crumble. That in itself is a big time weakness and is a good sign of the beginning of the end. For example, take a look at someone who is struggling, always in trouble or one who has chosen to work against the whole brotherhood thing. Someone who at times can hurt a fire service brother or sister. Nine times out of ten when you take a closer look, they'll be lacking foundation. They lack a values system and they lack it at home. It all starts at home. Develop those values, live by them and then only will you begin to strengthen that foundation.

Building upon that foundation also means keeping your priorities in line. I love the fire service more than life itself, but my family comes first. With all of the demands our profession can place on you such as all of the schooling, training, continuing education, studying for promotions and in general just the time it takes to be good at what you do, it can be easy to forget what's waiting for you, patiently, at home. And when you look at the big picture, isn't that what it's all about, family? Remembering to

take care of what's at home. If you're not good at that, you're probably not good at work and struggling there as well.

We try to bring that kind of atmosphere to Lewisville, the one that helps our folks with the "first family." We discussed in an earlier issue the importance of having awards ceremonies that the whole family can participate in. The hiring and promoting ceremonies that bring families together and encouraging family members to visit more often at the firehouse and make them feel welcome and at home. We even take it a step further with encouraging and allowing the spouses and children of our firefighters to come in and witness and experience what dad or mom does at work. Not a week goes by where you don't see one of our member's kids riding out. Once in a while the question of "liability" comes up. We've got a waiver that gets signed and we have rules that define what a rider, any rider, can and cannot do while riding out with a station or company. We believe that this particular program does a lot more for our members than it hurts. Maybe by allowing this liability we can help reduce the "liability" some of our troops face at home. For all we know it might help keep a few more families together. We even have child size department and company t-shirts for children to wear and even have some small sets of turnout gear. We really want our firefighter's families to feel like they are part of it all. This is just a small start in getting that done.

In closing, here are just a couple of areas that help keep both families strong.

- Remember where your priorities are. Take care of the "first" family. It's a great way to start taking care of the "second" family.
- Remember what the brotherhood is *really* about. It's a 24/7 commitment!
- Just as it's important to take care of the things at home, remember to never betray the family at work.

- Establish a 100 Club or as we did here in Denton County, The Heroes of Denton County. Both are organizations that are set up to assist the families of firefighters and police officers that suffer a loss due to a line of duty death. There are many already established across the country, unfortunately there are many areas that still don't have that kind of support and assistance program in place.
- Implement a good program for the line of duty death. Whether you model something after the National Fire Academy's "Taking care of our own" program or a similar program. Set it up now, so if God forbid you suffer a line of duty death, you're there to take care of the family. When it comes to the respect and dignity that a fallen brother or sister and their family deserves, there are some really good resources out there to model after such as what Chief William Peters put together for Fire Engineering. Another great program is that used by the Illinois Fire Chiefs Association and a good contact for that is Chief Dan Hermes of the Pleasantview (IL) fire protection district.
- Remember to be fair, objective and honest at work. Stay open and encourage diversity and just be nice.
- Remember what the 9/11 and memorial stickers are for that are on your helmet. NEVER FORGET means NEVER FORGETTING!
- And probably the most important of it all, is making good decisions and thinking before you act. Making the right decision because it is the right thing to do. Decisions made on emotions almost always are wrong and can hurt or get people in trouble. Decisions that are made on good solid information and common sense usually go a long way and see better results in the end. Remembering that each decision you make is going to impact someone in either or both of your families. We teach our kids not to drink and drive, do drugs or not to get into a car with someone who is under the influence, once in a while we need to remind some of those in our second family as well.

Life's turns, it's all about family! And this means both families. As you travel, life will throw you a couple of turns from time to time. Sometimes the choice you make and the turn you take can make for success or set you up for failure. Make good decisions and make good choices. Remember what's at stake. Making good decisions, taking care of *both* families is the only way we can keep the foundation that supports our values, from crumbling. Be safe.