

PHOTOGRAPHER'S JOURNAL



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SOAPBOX

At Middle Age, a New Flame

By GRANT GLICKSON

WHEN men hit middle age, they sometimes buy themselves a vintage Corvette Sting Ray, or slather Grecian Formula on their graying hair, or take up high-stakes games like Texas Hold'em.

Fortunately for my wife (I think I've never been like most men. So with my 40th birthday on the radar screen, I embraced the 10-year-old boy lurking in my grown man's heart: I decided to become a volunteer firefighter for Manalapan Fire Company No. 1.

My youngest son, Ryan, who is 5, questioned the wisdom of this decision after hearing a fire department officer explain the job requirements: respond to 60 percent of emergency calls, complete a Fire Fighter 1 Course that encompasses 14 full days, and attend weekly meetings, fire drills and work details.

"Daddy, why do you want to do this?" he asked after climbing aboard several bright yellow fire trucks.

"Because I want to help people in the community," I said.

"I know that you're strong. But what if there is a really big guy in a fire? Will you be able to carry him out?"

"Yes. I'll put him over my shoulder, and carry him out in fireman's hold."

"But you wear glasses. You might look funny wearing glasses in your uniform on the truck."

"I'll be on a yellow fire truck. I'll look funny already."

He then closed his interrogation with a question that put a lump in my throat. He asked, "Are you going to die?"

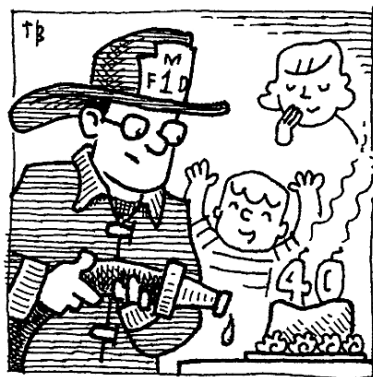
After a few moments, I said: "No. I'm going to be just fine."

Ryan's questions raged through my head as I was issued my protective equipment after my application was accepted. Frankly, I wasn't sure if I would be able to scale tall ladders in a single bound.

Despite other shortcomings, including being slightly claustrophobic — please don't tell Fire Chief John

Marini — my stint as a fireman began with my being allowed to participate in the Memorial Day parades in Freehold and Englishtown. My kids wound up joining the march and riding on the fire trucks. Some of their friends actually asked for my autograph. But my oldest son, Kyle, who is 9, quickly set the record straight: "He's not a real fireman yet. He hasn't even gone to firefighter school."

My vision of a firefighter's life was altered early on by the tasks we must complete daily. Instead of carrying damsels in distress from burning buildings, we roll and haul 100 feet of



Tom Bloom

5-inch hose (this stuff is heavy). We sweep, mop and power-wash the truck bays on a monthly basis. While we haven't had any emergency calls to rescue cats from trees, we have responded to more than our share of faulty fire alarms in warehouses and schools.

For sure, the true profile of a firefighter lies somewhere between Hollywood and the sleepy streets of a suburban town like Manalapan. While movies like "Backdraft" show their share of spectacular fires on the big screen, it is smaller things that make firefighting a less glamorous but equally rewarding job. What you don't see or hear in the movies are beepers going off in the middle of the night, the voices of dispatchers ringing in your head and other events that lead to racing to fires before they get out of control.

Unless you live it, it is hard to explain the adrenaline rush you get in dressing within seconds (clothes strategically placed at foot of the bed), running to a car that is backed into the driveway, speeding to the firehouse with emergency blue light blipping, gearing up in less than a

minute (often doing so on a speeding fire truck) and then dealing with whatever emergency has been thrown your way.

In my short time as a fireman, I've been to four structure fires, one emergency-services assist, four motor vehicle accidents and a handful of automatic fire alarms, and have helped drain basements in Jamesburg during flooding last July.

Working largely as a probationary member, I have had a limited role. In my first structure fire, I helped supply water to the trucks that arrived first. The second fire involved hazardous materials, and I was called on to decontaminate firefighters by hosing them off after they left the fire. The last two structure fires gave me the greatest chances to get involved; I stretched hose lines to the burning houses, retrieved tools that are used for venting and ripping through walls to check for smoldering fires, and served as a backup to the nozzle man as we helped put out the fire from the top step of the basement and through a first-floor window.

The Monmouth County Fire Academy, from which I recently graduated, has provided the toughest challenges so far. For more than 135 hours, spanning more than a dozen weekends, I learned about fire behavior (and how to put one out), forcible entry, CPR, searches and rescues, tying knots and climbing and working with ladders, some of which rise — like our tower ladder — as high as 75 feet.

The question I've been asked most often since beginning this process is: Why? (My mother has asked most often.) I can now answer with conviction. It has taught my children to give back to community and to never give up trying to achieve what appears to be unachievable. It has taught me the value of camaraderie on a job that can be dangerous. And it has opened my wife's heart to giving up some of her precious time — she is a part-time worker and full-time mother — to charitable work like our blood drive.

And to this middle-age man, I would much rather cover my graying hair with a fire helmet while riding in a great big truck (even if it is yellow, not red) with flashing lights than cruise in some Corvette convertible — with raven hair — on the way to a Texas Hold'em showdown.

Grant Glickson is a member of the sports staff of The New York Times.

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