

Telling Stories: Where There is Smoke

By Julie Petruzzellis



HOW DO YOU CHANGE A STORY THAT EVERYBODY THINKS they already know? How do you change it when it's already been written and repeated over and over again?

Imagine this story is about you. It's all over the media. Everyone hears it and repeats it back to you like it's the only story there is. Imagine telling the media: "Hey, that's not my story." And then imagine them responding: "Don't be silly, we know your story and we can tell it better than you."

The story goes something like this:

"Firefighting is a man's job. Some women have made inroads, but firefighting is really a job performed by firemen since most women aren't strong enough to do the work or aren't interested in the job. Because firefighters are overwhelmingly men, women will experience ongoing sexual harassment and assault in their workplaces. Men will remain hostile to women joining the profession because women have been hired to fill equity quotas without being fully qualified for the job."

With this story dominating the conversation, any firefighter could be forgiven her hesitation to get out of bed in the morning.

The Women Firefighter Narrative Visibility Project was conceived as a way to interrupt the repetitive loop of this story. Fire Service Women Ontario partnered with community arts organization Red Dress Productions to find a way for women firefighters to tell their own stories in their own words without having to rely on the media to get it right.

There is no denying that workplace sexual harassment and assault are a problem to which the first responder community is not immune. But the presumption that this is the only experience that women have as firefighters underscores the limits of the public understanding of our profession. Consider how little the public, your friends, and even your families actually know about your profession - the calls you run, the tools you use, your traditions, uniforms, expectations, career trajectory, protocols, hierarchies, health and safety risks, linguistic idiosyncrasies, mourning practices, subcultures ... the list goes on.

The Women Firefighter Narrative Visibility Project became "Where There Is Smoke" - an evocative multimedia art installation with 30 minutes of curated audio recordings as centrepiece. These audio pieces were created by the artists at Red Dress Productions from recordings made at a dozen writing workshops across southern Ontario.

The stories range from humorous workaday moments at the station to deeply personal accounts of fire calls. Personally, I found the piece recounting a high-rise fire in a hoarder's home particularly resonant.



By challenging the established story about firefighters we could also challenge the image of the archetypal firefighter: that strong white guy we all picture.

Several audio pieces used a layering technique with similar statements repeated multiple times by different workshop participants, such as “Do they let you drive the truck?” The end result is a funny crescendo of voices that make the question seem absurd. Of course we drive the truck. The piece challenges the listener to reexamine questions they might have about us.

Disrupting this archetypal image and the story he embodies was the primary goal of the project. But the project also had the objective of mitigating the effects of alienation women feel in the workplace when they are “the other.” Workshop participants included more than 30 professional and volunteer firefighters ranging in experience from pre-service college students to women contemplating retirement after 25 years of service. It’s hard to describe what the two-hour workshops were like. They involved a lot of laughter and commiseration, some surprises and tears - all guided by thoughtful writing exercises led by community-based artists.

Here is what one participant had to say:

“I will often be the only woman, not only on my truck, but at a fire scene or a training session, the only woman among a dozen or more firefighters. And most of the time I don’t really notice it and it’s fine. But when I do get to be in a room of all female firefighters, that’s when I realize what I’ve been missing ... You don’t know what you’ve been missing until you suddenly have it ... The storytelling and camaraderie was something I didn’t know I needed so badly.”

The workshops met the key need to increase women’s sense of inclusion in the fire service workplace. They also created networking and mentorship opportunities for women firefighters.

An inaugural installation of Where There Is Smoke was presented at a public event on June 16, 2018 at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre in Hamilton. The event was open to all and many southern Ontario fire chiefs and union leaders were in attendance. The presentation furthered the project goal of increasing public understanding of the work of firefighting, including showing little girls that they can grow up to be firefighters. One member of the public had this to say about the installation:

“I thought I knew what firefighting was about; this experience made me realize how incomplete that idea was. It showed me the human and the humane aspects of something that now I can hardly call a job.”

There are plans afoot to bring these stories to more firefighters and members of the public. An installation is planned for the FSWO Annual Symposium in October and other events and workshops will take place in the future. Going forward, the stories will be used by various fire departments as public education and recruitments tools.

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