

## Where There Is Smoke: The Women Firefighter Visibility Project



Where There Is Smoke, an interactive audio installation featuring women firefighters' narratives, is a multi-dimensional portrait of career and volunteer firefighters with a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. Part of the Women Firefighter Visibility Project, it will be on display as a one-day presentation at the Workers Arts & Heritage Centre on Saturday, June 16.

"We wanted to create an oral history that is more nuanced than what the media shows," says Julie Petruzzellis from Toronto Fire Service, who has worked as a firefighter for 12 years. She was one of two

female firefighters who approached Toronto's Red Dress Productions — a not-for-profit, professional arts company that creates and disseminates interdisciplinary art and performance projects — about embarking on a community arts project that dispels misconceptions about women working in the male-dominated field.

In a series of arts-based workshops and interviews in Toronto, Hamilton, and throughout Southern Ontario, 30+ women firefighters, with one to 25 years of experience, engaged with artists from Red Dress Productions to craft the stories that are the root of this exhibition. The installation will be presented with sound coming from 10 different speakers, as well as listening stations with headphones for a one-on-one listening experience.

"Firefighters are with people on the best days of their lives and the worst days. They see people at their last moments," says Anna Camilleri, artistic director at Red Dress Productions, who says she felt like an "honoured guest," as she glimpsed into a life that isn't her own. "Part of the work is difficult to share. There's trauma and loss of life."

Where There Is Smoke gave firefighters the opportunity reflect on their work and to also come together in a group to celebrate the work they do.

"The project creates new ways of looking at ourselves and what we do," says Petruzzellis. "It offers new ways for the public to challenge their perceptions of us," she adds, noting the archetype of a firefighter is usually a "grizzled white male." The project also encourages spectators to look more deeply at the work firefighters do.

"We do all kinds of different things," says Petruzzellis. "It's not just running into burning buildings," she says. The project also explores camaraderie, fire science, training, and being one woman (or a few) amongst many.

"For most of us, life is spent doing mundane things," says Camilleri. "I think the everydayness of life is worthy of attention," she says, noting that what we often know of firefighters is what we see on television.

Petruzzellis hopes that the installation challenges misconceptions and sexist assumptions of what people think female firefighters can do.

"I've been asked so many times if I drive the fire truck." It's an innocent question, she says, but it comes from misinformed stereotypes of what female firefighters are capable of.

"In the popular imagination, firefighters aren't women," says Camilleri, but Petruzzellis has hope that this will change.

“There are more women, more visible minorities,” she says. “Change is happening, but there’s still a long way to go.” Petruzzellis hopes that projects like the Women Firefighter Visibility Project will inspire women to consider firefighting as a career.

“We’re starting to see the legacy of women firefighters,” says Petruzzellis, who is encouraged to see the children of female firefighters join the profession. More female role models will help make this possible, she says, adding that increased visibility is a crucial step.

“I don’t want people to do double takes on the street. I want it to be commonplace,” she says.



### **Where There Is Smoke**

#### **The Women Firefighter Visibility Project**

Workers Arts & Heritage Centre

51 Stuart Street

June 16 (4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.)

Free admission