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If you live outside of a big city, your community may very well be protected by the courageous efforts of a volunteer fire department. In the beautiful village of Hastings-on-Hudson a half-hour north of New York City, the personnel of their own volunteer fire department is proving to be as talented as it is highly trained. Case in point is Fire Police Captain Steve Horelick, who just earned an Emmy nomination for his day job as music composer for the long-running PBS educational series "Reading Rainbow."

A member of the Hastings-on-Hudson volunteer fire department since 1998, Horelick may be earning national recognition for his talents, but he actually doesn't consider his story to be any more remarkable than any of the other dedicated volunteers he serves with. His dedication to his company, however, Riverview Hose Company #3, and his belief in the potential importance of volunteerism in everyone's life, may just be above and beyond.

Q: Why did you become a volunteer firefighter?

A: I was asked. It had a lot to do with a growing interest I was developing in volunteerism and service at the time. I never had dreams as a kid of being a firefighter, my dreams were more about being a rock star, but our department is such a powerful presence in the Hastings-on-Hudson community, and I had some good friends who were joining up, so I did the same.

Q: Why do you think volunteer firefighting is important?

A: Volunteering is important. In our small towns here and all across America, we can't afford the services that a big city can supply. All of us are busy with our lives, earning money and raising families, but if we didn't have a volunteer fire department in Hastings, we wouldn't have such a good one -- we couldn't afford to hire enough guys to effectively meet the emergency needs of the community.

Q: Now that you've been a volunteer fireman for almost ten years, what have you found you like most about it?

A: When I first started, as any newbie in an fire department does, you feed off the adrenaline rush of fighting fires, saving people and property -- along with the excitement of putting the blue light on your car and racing to a fire! As you mature in the department, fighting fires is still a rush, however it's more about the public service and the brotherhood. Those are the things that become extremely important to me over time.

Q: What did you have to go through to become certified?

A: We have to go through the same New York State training as career firefighters. We are pros, even though we're not paid. Firefighting is dangerous, so training is extremely important. Not only that, but on a weekly basis we get together as a company and drill. It's a lot of commitment, and it's deep.

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Q: What's your own specialty within the department?

A: Currently, I'm the captain of the Hastings-on-Hudson Fire Police. I'm also interior attack firefighter and a pump operator. That means I can get the engine to the scene, and make sure the attack guys inside get the water they need to knock down the fire.

Q: How many serious fires have you been on the scene for?

A: Every time our pagers go off it's serious. Sometimes it's a false alarm, food on the stove and other times it's a fully involved fire. I've been involved in putting out probably ten structure fires of varying degrees, as well as several vehicle and brush fires.

When an alarm goes off, you never really know how involved it will be. When you turn that corner, like we did on a frigid January morning a few years ago, and you see the flames leaping 50 feet out of a residential building, that's when a certain seriousness of purpose comes over everybody. When duty calls we all have our jobs to do, and we follow the commands from our volunteer chiefs, captains and lieutenants. Most of the time the experience is much more one of camaraderie, but when it gets serious everyone turns into a professional.

Q: Do you actually wait for the alarm to ring in the station house – how does the company have you on call?

A: Everybody has a pager. In this town we have four fire companies within the department, so no one is on full time but everybody is on call. Once we're a part of the department, our priorities are 'God, Family, Business and Fire.' That means that if you possibly can make it, you make it, and if you can't you can't. That's why volunteer departments need large numbers to be effective, especially in the daytime when our members are out earning a living.

Q: What's the feeling you get after an event – knowing that you helped people during an emergency?

A: Recently there were some heavy storms that resulted in flooding here from the torrential rain. The guys were out all night long, helping a lot of people that were stranded in cars or whose basements were filled with 8 feet of water, for example. Nothing feels better than being able to help a neighbor in need, and these are people you see all the time. Hastings is a small town, and it feels great to know that if you're the one in need all you have to do is make one phone call, and you get four engines and forty guys geared up and ready to go.

Q: Has being a volunteer firefighter impacted other areas of your life?

A: Being a firefighter has helped shape me as a composer by adding a layer of richness to my life that I can draw upon for inspiration. As a composer for TV shows I have important responsibilities, but it's never a life-or-death situation -- although the producers may think otherwise! Being a member of the fire department has really broadened my perspective and the perspective of my family and especially my children.

Q: Why would you urge other people to consider looking into a volunteer position in their local community?

A: When I was just living here and commuting into the city, I was not nearly as connected to the community as I am now. I've made friendships and lifelong bonds with people I didn't have the honor of knowing before. The public service aspect is great, but being much more strongly connected to the people in my community has been the unexpected gift.

Musicians, bankers, carpenters, lawyers, sanitation workers -- we're all in this: anyone can be a volunteer firefighter. It helps strengthen the fabric of the community. It's the difference between living somewhere and being an integral part of it.

To become a volunteer firefighter or EMT, please contact your local fire department.

For more information on Steve Horelick please visit www.stevemusic.com.