

There Are No Medals For Common Sense

By
Vina Drennan

Captain John J. Drennan died fighting fire in the City he loved with firefighters he loved. For forty days, his struggle to live was followed by the people of New York City, who showed their respect for Captain Drennan and for all firefighters who continue to put their lives on the line. Heroes, every one of them.

When FDNY chose to honor the commitment of John Drennan with a medal, I of course was honored by the tribute. "Could we use the medal to honor a member who shows extraordinary commitment to reducing fire through prevention and safety education?" I so naively asked. You can imagine the reaction. So the "John J. Drennan Medal" is imprinted with the solid, powerful word "VALOR." I sincerely am honored to present it to a firefighter who risked so much to be deserving of this medal. Yet as I stand on the podium at the FDNY Medal Ceremony and look into the faces of the firefighter's family and see the pride in their eyes, I wonder if they even realize how close they come to losing their loved one every time a firefighter responds to the alarm.

Yes, it takes courage to fight fires, a courage I will never know; to face those flames, the heat, the darkness, the unknown. But I'm sorry I didn't hold my own in those early days following his death. It takes great courage to fight fires with common sense too and there are no medals for common sense in New York City. There are probably no medals for common sense in your department either.

You readers of this article know what I mean. You are continually overcoming the obstacles of the culture that sees suppression as the only way to fight fire. Statistics verify that in cities that commit a mere 3% of their fire budgets to fire safety, lives and property are saved. It's hard to tally the lives saved in a community where the commitment to install smoke alarms is a priority. We don't know the name of a child that is spared the scars of fire because one of you went into the school to teach the importance of developing an exit plan for their family. We don't know which elderly lady you saved when you visited the senior citizen center in your neighborhood and gave a cooking safety demonstration. We don't know the names, but we do know the fatalities are decreasing and it's not because of bigger and shinier apparatus. It's going down because of the courage of firefighters who stand up to the macho, old boy, belly up to the bar mentality that has driven our departments for too long. It's going down because there are firefighters throughout our country that see a better way, members that truly want to prevent suffering and are tired of glorifying the failures of prevention. Many of you have witnessed too much sorrow in your careers and you want it to stop.

Within FDNY there are also people that share the commitment to prevent fire. They quietly do their work; often without the funding, without the respect with which we honor the others. The results of their efforts are showing up. In 1995, more New Yorkers died as a result of fire than all the victims that perished in the bombing at Oklahoma City did. We lost 173 of our people that year, but fortunately the trend has reversed as the department began

to focus attention to education and community outreach. At midyear 1998, we have 48 fatalities, way lower than the 88 deaths we counted as of June 30, 1996. Forty more people are alive this year and something has changed in New York City. Sure, we can give credit to the bunker gear firefighters now wear that allows them to save more lives. We can also give credit to the use of defibrillators that save more lives too, but we must give credit to the fire safety educators and programs that are effectively preventing fires throughout the City.

I wish we could present the Captain John J. Drennan Medal to the Fire Marshal, who having spent much of his career extinguishing fire, now devotes his efforts to arson investigation and whose consistent prayer is to have a month in which not one life is lost. I wish we could present the Captain John J. Drennan Medal to the Lieutenant who spends his day finding the resources he needs to supply the materials that help bring the fire awareness message to our people. I wish we could present the Captain John J. Drennan Medal to the firefighters that distributed batteries in a recent smoke alarm program.

To whom would you give the Captain John J. Drennan Medal in your department? He/She's there somewhere; probably frustrated, maybe being teased or ignored; used to being treated as an annoyance. He/She's there. I wish I could come and hang the Captain John J. Drennan Medal around his neck. "Don't quit" I would say. "Please keep trying and don't lose your courage. Together we will make a difference.