

Some Like it Hot: Tales from the Firehouse
Interview with Deputy Fire Chief Jason Sharp

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

firefighters, people, deputy chief, job, work, firehouse, fire department, department, calls, hour shifts, fire, learn, challenges, pandemic, day, happen, wife, policies, most difficult periods, fire station

Jen Weidner 00:05 Today is July the 11th 2023. I'm Jen Weidner with the Jeffersonville Township Public Library conducting interviews for Some Like It Hot:Tales from the Firehouse. I'm here today with Deputy Fire Chief Jason Sharp of the Jeffersonville Fire Department. Thank you for being here today.

Jason Sharp 00:17 Thank you for having me

Jen Weidner 00:18 So how long have you been with the department?

Jason Sharp 00:20 So I just celebrated my 23 year anniversary with the department.

Jen Weidner 00:25 And how long have you been the deputy chief?

Jason Sharp 00:26 Oh, well,I started. I guess it's been close to three years now, yeah.

Jen Weidner 00:32 Three years is right at the start of the pandemic.

Jason Sharp 00:34 Right, well yeah, right around the front end of it. Yeah.

Jen Weidner 00:36 So what made you want to become a firefighter?

Jason Sharp 00:39 Well, you know, I grew up in old Clarksville, and we live right across the street from the fire station on Stansifer Avenue and you know, seeing all those firefighters out there. You know, listen to them get dispatched on calls and watching them race down the street. It was, it was just such a great experience. And, you know, I finally went over got to meet a lot of those guys and those guys pretty much raised me, you know, growing up. So I guess it's almost kind of like falling in, like, almost like a father's footsteps because, you know, I mean, being there at such a young age and getting to know all those people. I mean, it was it was what I do. You know, it was what I was introduced to and I just found a passion for it and fell in love with it.

Jen Weidner 01:31 So if you weren't a firefighter, what do you think you'd be doing?

Jason Sharp 01:33 Oh, most likely, I would be either a first responder in a different capacity or maybe even in the military. Those would probably be the two things that I would probably most likely be.

Jen Weidner 01:52 So what are some of the challenges of your job? Either as the deputy chief or when you were online?

Jason Sharp 01:58 Oh, wow. So there's so many challenges in this this realm of public service, you know, and I think, I think each rank within the department has its own unique set of challenges. The hardest challenge at first was getting on getting hired, you know? A lot of the departments around here and they have like different hiring practices and stuff. Only have a handful of people or less than a handful really that leave every year so these openings are kind of few and far between so just getting on was a challenge. And then once you get started on the department, getting to know everybody on a close and personal level and you really, you really have to because you know you learn to depend on each other and lean on each other. I mean there's things that the guys at the firehouse know about you that not a whole lot of other people know and you know, things that's going on with your family and stuff. But you know, that's a little bit of a challenge, especially walking into a new group of people. And then as you progress, you learn how to drive the fire trucks. That's very challenging. Because now you're having to drive these big trucks on emergency calls and, you know, knowing how to operate them safely. Then transitioning into a company officer, you know, you, you actually have to start making decisions that can really impact the way that an entire incident is going to flow, how it's going to run. So you know, there's a lot of things to do when you're riding in the front seat, you know, you're trying to get directions the driver because you might want to hit a hydrant at a certain location or you might need to avoid a certain area because you know, the roads gonna be closed. You need to kind of formulate, you know, in your mind a little bit about what you're going to do when you get on scene, but you can't let that get too far ahead. Because you don't want to have tunnel vision, you know, and then you got to quickly assess, you know, what's going on and what's your plan of attack is going to be and then as you move past that and get into more command level operations. You know, there's that employee challenges and stuff, you know, Jeff has grown by leaps and bounds. Even over the last 20 years that I've been here, you know, I mean, when I first got hired, we had three stations and 48 firefighters. Now we run, you know, five stations and we have 92 firefighters. So, you know, when you grow, there's obviously more things that you have to take consideration. We're just coming off of a pandemic that changed the way that we do things, you know, there's ,there's always things to that, that changes the way that you do your job. And that just going to be part of you're going to have to accept it.

Jen Weidner 04:52 It's just life, things change. So how long did it take you to get used to working those 24 hour shifts when you first started out?

Jason Sharp 5:02 You know it wasn't very difficult to work the 24 hour shifts, it was difficult to have more free time than what I had in the past because you know, when you go from working Monday through Friday, you know you're usually on the same schedule as like all your friends and your family. Then when you go to work and 24 hour shifts. You know, you're off at a lot of times that your friends and family are not, so you had to find different things to occupy your time.

It was much easier getting used to working the 24 hour shifts than it was going back to working eight hour shifts, you know, I mean, when me and my wife got married, you know, I had already been working 24 hour shifts. You know, that's what we knew. And you know, it was always funny too, because the 24 hour shifts, things always comes up especially with the new firefighters and then the those that have families and stuff and I used to have so pretty frequently when I was their captain I'm like, so how are you used to dealing with the 24 hour shifts? And it's always seems like Oh, my wife doesn't much like or whatever, you know, and I'm like, Oh, don't worry. It's gonna come a day where they're gonna be like so when you go back to the firehouse again. That's the time that they learn to, you know, have their freedom and go do the things that they want to do and everything so it works out but transitioning back to the eight hour shifts were actually much harder than 24 hour shifts. And I was like, oh I hope my wife still loves me when I go home because I'll be home every night.

Jen Weidner 05:41 What do you do? I'm sure she's adjusted.

Jason Sharp 06:40 Oh she has she she likes me being home so it works out.

Jen Weidner 06:43 So what are some of the best parts of your job?

Jason Sharp 06:46 Oh wow so ,I find a lot of gratification and serving in the public, you know, being able to help people solve problems, being able to help people manage their way through some of the most difficult periods in their lives. I find that very rewarding. It's difficult at times you there's times that you carry these people's situations with you and you know, sometimes they're easier, a little more easier than others. But, you know, you find that, you know, your experiences throughout this career will help guide those people through those circumstances

Jen Weidner 07:42 Because you see people a lot of times on their worst day.

Jason Sharp 07:46 Yeah, you really do. You know, usually stuff that's going really bad. I mean, if somebody's calling 911 most likely they are experiencing their worst or one of the worst days that they have ever had. And when we show up it is our job to help solve the problem and sometimes we can. That's actually probably the hardest thing is that you know, when there's nothing you can do, you know, other than just maybe, you know, brace somebody or offer your condolences. That's hard for first responder. It's really hard to be told there's nothing you can do.

Jen Weidner 08:23 So I know there's no like typical day, but what do you do when you get to work?

Jason Sharp 08:29 So I think that question is probably different for every different person on the department. For me, when I come in. I usually walk down the hall and I'm usually greeted with I have this issue I have this issue. Hey, I sent you an email, you know, you know, it's I think it's different for everyone. But usually I come in in the mornings. I just kind of receive some, you know, reports about the ongoings, you know, either the night before or the day before. Anything that needs my attention, or somebody else is working on something they just want to let me know.

Jen Weidner 09:04 So as the deputy chief what is your or what are your responsibility?

Jason Sharp 09:07 So my department actually has two deputy chiefs. You have one Deputy Chief that oversees all the fire stations and buildings and all the apparatus and that is a tough job. It is a very busy job because, you know, you're talking about buildings that are being constantly occupied. Heavy equipment is constantly being used. Things break, things happen. And our deputy chief of that realm is very busy. Me and my position. What I do is I am the Deputy Chief of administration. So I oversee personnel oversee policies and procedures and you know, essentially on the number two in the line succession for the department so you have the chief and then you have me.

Jen Weidner 9:56 So people don't want to get called to your office?

Jason Sharp 10:00 No, typically no. And that's kind of one of the tough things about this position is that, you know, I'm very thankful that that, you know, we have a really great dedicated group of firefighters, but even they're not perfect, and things happen sometimes and it may be few and far between. But when those problems happen, then you know, you have to be that guy. And, you know, it's hard, especially when it may be somebody that, you know, you have come up through the ranks with that you have served with but, you know, my job is to treat people fairly, and, you know, make sure that people are operating within the boundaries of our policies and procedures. Now, I like it when people just stop by, say hi. Yeah, but yeah, being called to my office isn't always a good thing. It was always a bad thing either. You know, I just as much as I have to like you know, do disciplinary kind of stuff. I've really tried to take the time to recognize when these firefighters go above and beyond the call, and let me tell you, they do it very frequently. I think the people Jeff would be very pleased to know that the levels that these firefighters will push themselves through in order to win, to succeed.

Jen Weidner 11:31 And so I've heard from all the ones I've interviewed before. So is there one call that stands out to you more than others?

Jason Sharp 11:38 As far as like that I've done in the past or the one that the ones that I regret or I just cringed knowing that it's coming.

Jen Weidner 11:48 Whatever you want to tell us about. It may be, you know, a good call something fun, humorous that happened or it could be something that stuck with you for other reasons.

Jason Sharp 11:59 Well, I think I have both, you know, obviously, if you work in this job long enough, you're gonna come across things that are tough to digest, the kind of calls that you hope that you never have to make again. And there's also those times and those stories where you and your co-workers may have shared a prank either on somebody else or you were you were the joke of the day you know, whatever it may be. You know, I tell people all the time sometimes you're the fly sometimes you're the windshield and I have been the fly many occasions there's been plenty of times I did not help myself situation. So, you know, it's just kind

of the way it is. But yeah, I think every one of us has those calls that we have made that we just wish we could forget.

Jen Weidner 12:49 What are some misconceptions about firefighting, we see all these fire shows on TV and I know that all of that is not true.

Jason Sharp 12:58 Yeah so you know, there really is, you know, well, first of all, most fire departments have very strict facial hair policies. Because, you know, OSHA regulations and how your mask seals upon your face and they cannot be you know, broken up. You know, as far as like, the the different clothes that you wear and everything while you're on duty. You have to be cautious because there's, there's standards and guidelines out there that really kind of dictate what you do there. I think that it's just Hollywood doing Hollywood stuff, but you know, they try and make these you know, fire shows or probably even like the ER shows and police shows a lot more on edge and dramatic than what they are and you know, I think that they may, you know, really kind of go a little overboard with how on edge some of these people are all the time you know, our fire houses are usually filled with a bunch of just good people. Who just they kind of cut up I mean, they're serious when it's time to be serious you know, but you know, that's not the pulse of the firehouse.

Jen Weidner 14:13 These shows like there's always some kind of drama going on.

Jason Sharp 14:16 Oh no, no, it usually not like that. I mean, there ,there could be drama of some sorts, but it's not usually of that caliber, you know, some of the equipment they use isn't really standard industry equipment. They have to make like the face pieces bigger so they can see their faces because, you know, what's the point in hiring you know, these million dollar actors if you can't see who's portraying the part that so there's that and then, you know, in a lot of these these fires a show, you know what, you can see a lot of flames that you can't see a whole lot of smoke. Most fires that you have is you can't really see anything in this pitch black pitch black and hot. So you know, you have to learn to use some of your of your body's other senses, you know, matter of fact, there's a lot of times when I'm in a fire or how I used to be in the fire. I would actually close my eyes because I feel like I wouldn't be more in tune with those senses that I would really need to have unless I was using like a thermal imaging camera. And that technology just kind of really kind of came come out of the last, you know, several years, you know, but there's a period of time where you were just operating a field, you know, doing sweeps. And stuff like at you know, technologies finally caught up a little bit where you know, you can actually see through the smoke a little more so more like, like, look at their a video game,

Jen Weidner 15:44 Okay

Jason Sharp 15:44 Than anything, you know, but technology is pretty cool. So there's few examples.

Jen Weidner 15:51 So this ,this question probably does not apply to you now, but a lot of firefighters have side jobs. Did you have side jobs?

Jason Sharp 16:00 Oh, yeah. A couple. Oh, so I had was like what we talked about is like, you know, when ,when you used to work in these, you know, 24 hour shifts. You know, the typical you said you work 24 hours you usually work about 10 days a month. So, you need to find things to do to with the rest of your time that's what most firefighters do. Most firefighters start like a little side hustle or side business or something. And I first started out, doing some light hauling debris cleanup at like work sites and stuff like that. And then I ended up starting a lawn and landscape business but after I got married, and you know, my wife started her business doing her thing. I just let it go. You know, I was tired of working all the time. You know, I had a family so

Jen Weidner 16:45 Yep. So how does being a firefighter affect your home life?

Jason Sharp 16:51 Um, it's good and bad, I guess kind of times you know. I think that I'm a usually a little bit more observant with things than what people than most people like, you know, my situational awareness you know, anytime I walk into a business I always looking at where the exits are, you know, I don't like having my back to the doors, you know, just just different tactical stuff, but just things I've learned from the fire department as well. You know, I see things that most people don't see, they don't pay attention to, you know, there's been times where I've come up came home off shift and, you know, I would have to just tell my wife I was going downstairs to be by myself. I'd spent a little time downstairs by myself and she would usually know with that means, you know, I mean, and that's why the relationship with the people that you work with is so important and even have an access to, you know, professional care and everything because a lot of times you don't want to dump those things on to people that you love. You don't want them to know the kind of stuff that you've endured, and sometimes it just falls out, you know, but you know that I say that's probably how it affects you. It affects it the most. I'm real, I'm real particular. My wife likes candles, and I like candles too. But I'm real particular on you know, making sure that you know, like the candles burning and stuff, but

Jen Weidner 18:22 You don't want to burn your house down as a Deputy Fire Chief.

Jason Sharp 18:24 No but I tell you what, though, my wife kind of gets on me a little bit. I don't know why I've gotten so bad at this, like, you know what I get done like using the oven. Sometimes I forget to turn the oven off. And my wife has to come behind me. It's like I cannot believe you are the deputy chief of the fire department and I have to come behind you and turn things off.

Jen Weidner 18:43 But you're also human at the end of the day.

Jason Sharp 18:46 She's not wrong. That's just the way it is.

Jen Weidner 18:50 Yeah. So what advice would you give to anyone that wants to be a firefighter?

Jason Sharp 18:55 Well I would say that a fire department job encompasses a lot of skills and necessities that require a lot of different things. First of all, I'm sorry, you need to be physically fit. You have this job is a physical job and just to get your foot in the door, take some pretty

serious testing to do so. So your physical fitness is an important thing. Intelligence, the tests to get into the door of the fire department now are more challenging but they've ever been, and it's competitive. It's very competitive. So if you want to compete, you're gonna have to be a good test taker and you're gonna have to learn how to study material. You need to understand that this job is constantly changing. You know, just the 23 years that I've been in this department, the department that we are now versus the department we were when I first came on, is unrecognizable. The requirements of you that the things that you have to know ,you know when I first came on, you know, which was pre 9/11. You know, we fought fires and we made med calls every once in a while And then after 9/11 and Hurricane Sandy and Hurricane Katrina and you know everything in between leading through you know, COVID 19 pandemic, all those things have dramatically changed the way that I do my job and I've had been able to, I've had to adapt, you know, so better be adaptable, and just get comfortable with the thought that you're in a job where you're just gonna have to learn to be uncomfortable. Because fires happen at night. They happen when it's cold, they happen when it's hot, you know, you do not get to dictate the conditions. You know, things will happen when you don't want them to, but you have to deal with it.

Jen Weidner 20:55 So is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

Jason Sharp 20:58 No

Jen Weidner 20:59 Thank you so much.

Jason Sharp 21:00 Thank you