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- FIRE RESCUE MAGAZINE -



Photo Op

Photographer works to create a national archive of firefighter portraits

By Jane Jerrard

A photographer has made it her mission to record portraits of firefighters around the country—providing them with powerful photos of themselves, and building what she hopes will become a national historic archive of America’s bravest. Laura Yanes photographs firefighters in their bunker gear or dress uniforms, alone, with their families or as a department—whatever the individual requests. Her portraits are often intense, and always artistic and moving.

“These photos are a powerful message,” Yanes says. “The guys don’t realize it, but this is often the first time their spouse or family sees them like this, in their bunker gear.” Firefighters are happy with the photos, but it’s their families that treasure them.

And it all started with a single spur-of-the-moment photograph ...

A SINGLE PHOTO

Yanes was a new photographer in the summer of 2001 when she snapped her first firefighter portrait. Soon after starting her hobby of photography, she was walking around New York City with her camera, shooting whatever caught her eye. One day she passed FDNY’s Engine Company 14, where she noticed a firefighter leaning on the bumper of an engine. She asked permission to take his picture, and he agreed—with the condition that she give him a copy.

Yanes was on her way to the darkroom to develop her film when planes hit the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. Unsure of whether the firefighter she had photographed had survived, Yanes returned to the firehouse to deliver the prints. She found out that her subject, Ed Mecner, had been at Ground Zero when the Twin Towers collapsed, and he had survived. The firefighters who greeted Yanes when she returned asked if she would take their pictures, thus beginning a trend that grew until she had photographed an estimated 7,000 FDNY firefighters.

“She photographed everyone in our firehouse in 2003,” says FDNY Capt. Mike Dugan. “She gave each of us a nice portrait. My mother loved it.”

BUILDING AN ARCHIVE

As word of Yanes’ firefighter portraits started to spread, it was inevitable that departments beyond New York City would ask her to come for a photography session. “I resisted traveling outside New York for a long time,” Yanes admits. “It was just too hard.” But eventually she gave in. Today, she travels year-round, though she points out that she will sometimes stay in one location for as long as 4 months.

Each department finds a way to cover Yanes’ meals, travel and hotel. Sometimes it’s the department or the local union, and sometimes it’s getting a hotel or local charity to donate what she needs. “If the department or union can get me a hotel room—donated or paid with fundraising—and meals, I’ll ask each firefighter for a token fee (\$25 a session) to help cover my other costs,” Yanes says. “I’m not making any money on this.”

When I interviewed her, Yanes was in El Paso, Texas, photographing the city’s firefighters. John Concha, fire inspector at the El Paso Fire Department and second vice president of the El Paso Association of Fire Fighters

Local 51, says, “The association is helping her out. At first we wondered, doesn’t she have any sponsors? How is she surviving? She’s really sacrificing her time and her life to do this.” Concha thinks that departments and union locals will continue to help cover costs. “I can see how it’s growing,” he says. “Every city she goes to, the support grows. People are starting to understand the importance of this.”

A LIVING HISTORY

Yanes makes it possible for subjects to obtain prints of the photos. She posts photos online, which can only be accessed by the subject. But she has big plans for those online photos. “One day I was at Ellis Island and I saw that they have computers where you can enter a name and access photos and records for that [immigrant],” Yanes says. “I want to create that place with my photos, where grandchildren and great-grandchildren can go to see their firefighter relatives, with pride.”

Her vision of an online national archive is still in the distant future. Funding is the issue. “I don’t want to say this project is on a back burner because I’m always stirring this pot,” she says. “I’ve had offers of help for creating it, but it’s a big load for one person to carry. The expense of creating it is significant.”

The national archive site would allow each firefighter to design their own page, including personally selecting one of her portraits to represent them. “The bigger site will allow them to write a bio or include a video or audio recording. The site should also include the ability for firefighters to interact with other departments,” Yanes says.

Concha says he’s watched El Paso firefighters pose for portraits, and that “they don’t realize it until they see their pictures. Then it starts to dawn on them: This is history. This is something their grandchildren will see later on.”

BOOK HER

To contact Yanes, visit www.firefighterarchive.com and send her an e-mail. Yanes is currently the only photographer for the national archive, and she’s busy crisscrossing the country. So she may be too busy to respond right away, but she says she’s happy to start making plans.



PHOTO COURTESY LAURA YANES

Photographer Laura Yanes poses with firefighters from FDNY Engine 88 and Ladder 38, located near the Bronx Zoo.