

'Why fire fighters are not heroes' was written by Di Brown after the recent Muizenburg and Cape Point fires

# *"There is no place for a hero in a fire"*



Fire fighting is about team work, training, physical fitness and endurance. It is about respect for and understanding of fire and fire behaviour.

Fire fighters are not glory seekers who want to be heroes; they are dedicated men and women with a calling.

Most fire fighters I know, full time and volunteers, are humble people who have a fascination and passion for fires and fire fighting. Many of them display a strong sense of community service and you will often find they are involved in other ways, either as volunteers for other organisations or active on committees in whatever their particular hobby or sport is.

Right now, the work of the Volunteer Wildfire Services (VWS) may appear glamorous and exciting with many people wanting to do what they are doing.

The reality is that a fire on this scale only comes around every five to ten years.

The members of VWS spend many more hours doing training, standby duty, refresher courses and fitness skills than they do fighting fires. This requires a high degree of dedication and commitment. In my opinion, it is

this dedication that makes them heroes. They give up their free time so that when a fire like this occurs, they are trained, ready and willing to take leave from their jobs to do what must be done.

The fire fighters in the full time employment of the City of Cape Town Fire and Rescue Services do what we are seeing now on a daily, weekly and monthly basis and more. Often on a smaller scale and out of the public eye, many times more dangerous than what we are seeing in this fire.

Over and above wildfires, they also contend with countless veld fires that can take hours to put out, burning houses, runaway shack fires, false alarms, incidents regarding hazardous materials and burning factories.

Fire and rescue workers are also trained in basic life support and part of their job is attending motor vehicle accidents. They have to keep their spirits up when being faced with death, tragedy and danger on a regular basis.

There is no place for a 'hero' who wants to run into a burning building to rescue the little child or the fire fighter who breaks away from his crew to run down a ravine to rescue Bambi. This behaviour puts the entire fire crew at risk. Fire fighting is about teamwork, obeying orders and being in a frightening situation while staying calm, thinking clearly and putting the hours of training and studying into practice.

The unseen side of the City of Cape Town fire fighters and the numerous fire departments across South Africa, are the hours and hours of drills and practice, the cleaning of the station and vehicles, sitting watch answering calls between midnight and 4h00 am and dealing with abuse, stoning of vehicles and disruptive bystanders when at calls. It is the abandoning of the supper they have just cooked at the station to respond to a call. It is busy shifts when they run out of clean gear and spend 12 hours in wet clothes. It is the effort required while off duty to maintain the fitness levels required to do the job effectively.

I am not speaking as a representative of VWS or the City of Cape Town Fire and Rescue Services.

I am speaking as the mother of a son who has been with VWS for 10 years and who is a full time fire fighter for the City of Cape Town. I have washed the uniforms, seen the exhaustion, heard the coughing and missed my son when he has been on duty on countless birthdays, Christmas, public holidays and family celebrations.

I salute all the members of the VWS, City of Cape Town Fire and Rescue Services, disaster management and Working on Fire members.

**By Di Brown**

Thank you for your selfless dedication.

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