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FEEL THE HEAT

**FIGHT A FIRE ALONGSIDE
ALUMNI FIREMEN**

BY KRIS GALLAGHER

“You’re using all your senses. You’re hearing, smelling, feeling your way,” says **Dave DuVall (BUS ’92)**, who’s fought fires since 1989. Thick smoke inside a burning building means he can’t depend on his vision. So how do you battle a blaze? Three DePaul alumni take you inside.

Smoke signals

Even before their trucks stop rolling, firefighters focus on the smoke.

“You look at the color of the smoke and the force with which it is coming out of the building. That tells you how much energy is building up inside and how fast the fire is burning,” says **Brian Dempsey (SNL ’08)**, fire chief in Seaside, Calif.

“A pillar of darker brown smoke usually means the structure itself is burning or the fire is inside the walls,” says **Joseph Moore (EDU ’89, LAS MS ’08)**, a lieutenant in Orland

Park, Ill. “Blacker smoke usually means it is plastics and the contents of the building. The building itself might not be burning yet.”

Smoke is also a good predictor of where the fire is, says DuVall, a lieutenant in Dolton, Ill. “If smoke’s coming out of the chimney, that usually means the fire’s in the basement. If you see it through the windows or coming out the door, it’s higher up. The location of the smoke is giving you all kinds of clues.”

Those clues disappear once firefighters enter the building. Unless they come upon

the orange of the actual fire, the only thing they can see through their air mask is smoke.

“Especially if you’re inside, you’re not seeing anything, so you’ve got to use your other senses to find your way,” says DuVall. “You’re mainly crawling and feeling. The guy in front of you, you’re hitting his boot to make sure he’s with you.”

Smelling trouble

The air masks that provide air and protect firefighters from toxic fumes also eliminate their sense of smell, so they use their noses before they go in.

Fires involving electrical components—motors, wires, fluorescent lights—have a distinctive odor, as do stovetop fires, says DuVall, who started working as a part-time firefighter while attending DePaul. “Eventually, you get experienced enough with that smell that you know it’s a food fire before you even go inside.”

“You can smell if it is wood burning or if it has a different odor, like gasoline or a petroleum product,” says Moore, who also started as a part-time firefighter and turned it into a career. “A car fire definitely has its own type of odor because of plastics.”

“ALL DAY, AT ANY MOMENT, THE BELL COULD RING AND YOU GET TO GO HELP SOMEONE.”

Joseph Moore (EDU '89, LAS MS '08)

Crash and burn

A car fire is distinctive for its sounds: tires bursting and windows blowing out from the heat. In a house fire, there are all kinds of noises, says Dempsey, who worked for the fire department in Rolling Meadows, Ill., for 31 years before moving west.

“You’ve got engines pulling up. Their sirens are [powering] down. The engineer has got the pump going. The RPMs on the engine are going up to supply the water. You might have somebody cutting a hole in the roof, so you’ve got the saw going. Somebody might be forcing the door in the back, so there’s some pounding,” he says.

All of that is muffled inside the house, where the primary sound is burning wood,

like an enormous crackling campfire. The firefighters follow the sound to find the fire.

In very hot fires, metal objects such as heating ducts creak and groan as they distort. Windows and lightbulbs shatter. If their gear didn’t block the sound, firefighters would hear water hissing into steam. There’s constant chatter on the walkie-talkies and shouted instructions.

Nevertheless, there are occasional flashes of stillness.

“Somewhere in all the chaos there can be very quiet, almost peaceful moments, which you need if you’re trying to find someone or listen if you can hear fire anywhere,” Moore says.

Sweatsuits

Dempsey says that when he started fighting fires in 1979, firefighters might remove a glove to feel whether fire was heating a wall or door from the other side.

“The beauty of today’s technology is that we have thermal imaging cameras, which allow you to not only see the fire—see the heat—but also to get a temperature,” he says. “Knowing that may change your tactic.” For example, if there’s smoke but no heat, the problem may be as simple as a scorched pot on the stove.

Firefighters work in temperatures as high as 1,600° F. Their gear—boots, pants, coats, hoods, gloves, helmets and masks—are designed to insulate them from the heat. Still, “when you get close to the fire, you definitely can feel it,” says DuVall.

Of course, body heat is trapped inside their gear, along with the sweat that is soon pouring down their backs. It’s especially brutal in the summer. That’s why firefighters have to take a break every 20 to 30 minutes to rehydrate and change their air bottles, says Moore.

Adds DuVall, “If you’ve been there for a while, your air pack’s going to start cutting into your shoulders. Your gear is getting waterlogged. Everything is feeling heavier.”

“JUST LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE, THERE’S MORE THAN ONE WAY TO PUT OUT A FIRE.”

Dave DuVall
(BUS '92)

Photo by Thomas Burns



Dave DuVall (BUS '92) says the roar of chainsaws adds to the din during a fire.

Photo by Nic Courty

**“NO DAY IS
EVER THE
SAME.”**

**Brian Dempsey
(SNL '08)**



Brian Dempsey (SNL '08), fire chief in Seaside, Calif., says tactics change based on clues firefighters sense about the fire.

Time warp

All three agree that time distorts inside a burning building, but they experience it differently.

“It goes very quick. You might have been on the scene for 20 or 30 minutes, and it just seems like five minutes,” says Dempsey.

“You lose your sense of time,” says Moore. “You think it was an hour, and it was only 15 minutes.”

“Everything’s moving fast, but you yourself are moving slowly,” says DuVall.

That’s why firefighters wear timers and carry air bottles that last about 20 minutes, so that they know when to rotate out of the

fire. Moore says, “It’s like an egg timer on your back.”

Adrenaline rush

“Those first five to 15 minutes, setting everything up, or going inside and trying to get at the fire, it’s just basically pure adrenaline,” says DuVall. Firefighters make good use of it, Dempsey adds. “Physically, you can do a little bit more than you normally would if you didn’t have that excitement.”

The adrenaline disappears in a hurry when the fire is out, Moore says, and there is still a lot to power through. “If we’re doing our job, we’re getting there in five [minutes], we’re

putting it out in five, and we’ll hopefully have it all under control within 10 minutes. Then it’s another hour or so of cleanup,” he says. “You have to put that vehicle back in service, you have things to clean, you have to clean yourself up, you have to clean your gear up, you have to make sure everything is okay and healthy and ready to go for the next call.”



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