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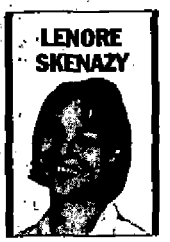
Fire wives: Call them heroes, too

It is brave to run into a burning building, agreed. But it is also plenty brave to let your beloved run into a burning building, knowing full well you may never see him again, never laugh with him again, never ask him to hold the baby while you go to the bathroom.

That's why, when it comes to guts, firefighters' wives are in the same league as their husbands.

They just don't see it that way.

"I said, 'Do whatever you think will make you happy,' " says Josephine Squire, recalling the discussions she and her husband, Al, had before he joined the department.



"I knew it was dangerous and that I would always worry, but I just said, 'The decision is yours.' "

But, of course, that decision was hers, too. A decision to accept a life of worry, for his sake.

"I lost my mother when I was 7, so I know about how that affects children," says Robin McKeon, whose husband, John, is captain of Manhattan's Engine Co. 16.

"I don't want my kids — or anybody else's kids — to go through that," says the mom of three. But she knows as well as anyone that tragedy all too often comes with the job.

On Sept. 11, her husband's firehouse lost six men.

Like the firefighters, the wives somehow manage to steel themselves to this reality. They do so by stoically ignoring the obvious: that battling blazes is one of the world's most dangerous occupations.

"If you thought of that, it would drive you crazy," says fire wife Cheryl Ruggirello. "So when [your husband] leaves for work, you think of it as any kind of job."

And just as her husband must shrug off the possibility of death, Cheryl has to shrug off the possibility of being left alone to raise their five kids. Only since the terror attacks has she even allowed herself to wonder, "Could I still be a good mom without him?"

Well, could she? "It would be overwhelming," she said.

And yet, very few firefighters' wives say they would consider interfering with their husbands' career choice.

"I'm a very nervous person as it is, but you've got to think of other people before yourself," says Laura Finley, who has been married to her "perfect" husband, Brian, for three years.

He cooks, he cleans, he tells her to put her feet up as he prepares the new recipes he has brought home from the firehouse. But still, she lets this precious man head off to an unknown destiny each workday.

"It would be, like, selfish if I kept him all to myself only to take care of me when instead he can be out there helping the whole city," she says.

Excuse me, Laura. Sacrificing personal happiness for the greater good — isn't that the very definition of bravery?

Sure is. And that's what these women have buckets of.

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