

## **Interview with Chief Joanne Hayes-White**

### **San Francisco Fire Department**

Joanne Hayes-White – JHW

**Caption:** What does it take to be a successful fire and EMS leader?

**Caption:** Chief Joanne Hayes-White. Fire Chief of San Francisco.

**JHW:** San Francisco Fire Department is responsible for protecting lives and property to the residents of San Francisco and the visitors of San Francisco. We are also responsible for the 911 Emergency Service aspect. To be successful as the Chief here in the San Francisco Fire Department, I think I've learned that it's important to be a good communicator, a collaborative person, and someone that leads by example. So I would never ask someone in the Department to do something that I wouldn't be capable to do myself or willing to do myself. San Francisco's unique in many different aspects and we need to make sure we aggressively fight fires; we have very closely attached dwellings, zero lot length separation which means if we have a fire we need to get there as quickly as possible and give an aggressive fire attack or we're at risk of losing perhaps the whole block. We're a wind-driven city, we have a lot of hills, surrounded by water on three sides, so it's very unique in terms of being able to fight fires here and suppress fires. The history of San Francisco is that not just the 1906 earthquake but up until that point there were five large fires that literally each time almost swept the city from the map. In 1906, there was a big earthquake and fires that raged for three days beyond that. So we've learned a lot from the fact that we're seismically vulnerable. In 1989, we experience the Loma Prieta earthquake where there was some devastation from our city. But we had learned lessons from 1906 that we had in place to make the damage less so that we'd seen in 1986. And in the last 20 years, we've become much more aggressive in terms of disaster preparedness, not just in training of members, but we've successfully trained approximately 20,000 people in the city and county of San Francisco who are NERT trained – Neighborhood Emergency Response Team trained – and have basic disaster preparedness skills.

**Caption:** How does the San Francisco Fire Department interact with its citizens and business community?

**JHW:** San Francisco Fire Department is a fire department that's very rich in history and tradition. Having said that, since I've been serving as the Chief of the last six years, we're also a very proactive department. We need to make sure that we don't just respond out to the community and to the citizens when the bell goes off. To me, one of the highest priorities is that we are good community neighbors with the citizens that live here and the visitors that come to this town. I like to say that San Francisco is a large city, a big city, but a small town feel and that any person should feel very comfortable walking into any one of our 42 stations whether it'd be just to visit with one of their children, to ask a question, to get their blood pressure checked. I like the idea that, like I said, we're a large city and a paid professional department and to have that small town feel. And people feel comfortable working side by side with their firefighters.

**Caption:** How do you determine what services and what level of service your citizens need?

**JHW:** Fighting fires and responding to medical emergencies is basically what we do in the San Francisco Fire Department. We take that mission very seriously and we're proud to say that, typically, we're on scene anywhere in the city when we're called for a Code 3 call within three to five minutes. That's very important to us and meeting that goal is something we do on an everyday basis. Of course, in the event of a large scale disaster, those time frames are shifted somewhat and that's why the community plays a large role in being as prepared as they can when our system is going to be overwhelmed. We provide a broad variety of services including fire suppression, fire prevention, confined space rescue, hazardous materials, surf and cliff rescues, a whole variety of services that our citizens demand, expect, and that we need to be sure that we provide. Not as easy as it has always been with shrinking dollars and challenging economic times, so we've tried to be as creative as possible to continue to provide the same high level of service in extraordinarily difficult budget times.

**Caption:** What steps do you take to deal with the loss of revenue to retain services?

**JHW:** One of the biggest challenges that we have here in the San Francisco Fire Department is throughout the – not just locally and state but also the nation – is shrinking budgets for public safety. Public safety should be prioritized in all communities, San Francisco being so exception. Having said that, there are a lot of competing interests that are also requiring budgets and dollars and so forth. But what we've tried to do to bridge that gap is work collectively with the private sector and I'm proud to say in the six years that I've been Chief, close to three-quarters of a million dollars has been contributed and donated by the private sector. We have been beneficiaries of a great program through Firemen's Fund Insurance called the Heritage Program. They have provided us with.... We provide them with a wish list and they provide us with great equipment including respiratory mask fitting equipment, dive equipment, emergency medical services bags, a whole variety of things that we would love to have and we obviously couldn't pay for it out of our own budget, but the private sector has stepped up and partnered with us. So that's something I've very proud of.

**Caption:** What steps have you taken to ensure your department is sensitive in dealing with a diverse population?

**JHW:** For anyone who's visited San Francisco, it's a beautiful city; I would encourage anyone to visit if you haven't done so. It is a city that's rich in diversity. That's one of the best things that I love about raising my boys here is that there's all kinds of different people, that add to the rich fabric of our city. And one of the things that I'm very proud of as Chief of this department is that we have a workforce that truly affects the community we're serving. We're very diverse. Approximately 15 percent of our uniformed workforce; they're the highest numbers in the country. We've got 250 women in our workforce. In addition, we have a lot of bilingual firefighters from all different races and backgrounds. And to me, that's value added when you respond to someone within the community and they see a diverse group of people working together, nine times out of ten they can relate to one or more of the people on the crew. And everyone has a

different background, but everyone brings their strengths to the table. So we're very proud of the diversity of our department which I believe gives a better service to the members of our very diverse community.

**Caption:** What is San Francisco's biggest fire risk and what steps have you taken to mitigate it.

**JHW:** The biggest risk that San Francisco faces is a disaster. Prior to 9/11/2001, it was always about seismic vulnerability; that still remains a concern, a huge concern. It's not a matter of if but when the earthquake will hit. Combined with what we saw happened in 9/11, we have made sure that on both fronts, whether it'd be a natural disaster – an earthquake – or a man-made act of terrorism that we are prepared. And so we have a sort of all-hazards approach where, even though they would be different events, similar consequences. So we have made sure that we...training is the number one priority. Training is important in any sector, but particularly in the arena in public safety; it takes on a greater meaning. So we've done very comprehensive training of our workforce. We've gotten the community involved with NERT training – Neighborhood Emergency Response Team Training – and we've learned from previous seismic events. Most recently we've seen some earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, and China. It's a matter of time until San Francisco experiences another earthquake. That right now is probably the biggest thing on our minds, but we also need to be mindful of the fact that San Francisco is a target-rich environment for terrorism as well because it is an icon, many people come here. So we need to make sure our guard is always up. Under this mayor, Gavin Newsom, who appointed me Chief, we've worked more closely together with other departments. I consider the police department our sister or brother department and as well our Department of City Works, our City Administrators' Office, our communications. Drilling and practicing before the event is much more prevalent than before I entered the department 20 years ago. So we're communicating a lot more and we're also preparing our workforce as well as our citizenry to be prepared for a disaster.

**Caption:** How should people who aspire to be fire chiefs prepare themselves for this position?

**JHW:** When I came into the department 20 years ago, it was a very different looking department; there were very few women. Growing up in the '50s and '60s, I was always inspired and interested when the red fire engine would go by, but I never thought, "Boy, I can be a firefighter some day," because there were no role models, there was nobody that looked like me that was riding on a fire engine. So when I graduated with a degree in business, I still hadn't thought too much about entering the fire department. And when I talked to my parents, who had sacrificed a lot to put me through college, that I wanted to join the fire department, they were never not supportive but somewhat skeptical because they said a, it's very dangerous, b, there's not a whole lot of people that look like you that do that work – i.e. not many women. And the third thing was at the time, education – a college degree – was not needed to become a firefighter. So they were concerned for those three different levels. But I was always appreciative of their support and I told them, "You know, I think things will work out," never realizing that not only would I get into the fire department, but someday be leading and be proud of leading this department. So when I talk to people about opportunities, whether it'd be in the fire

service or any other opportunity, if there's something at all that interests you but the timing might not be right or you have a few hesitations, if you are interested I always say "when opportunity knocks on the door, walk through with confidence and see where it'll take you." And that's exactly what happened to me. I had no idea that I would one day end up leading this department as the Chief. And for those that are coming up through the ranks, I think one of the best pieces of advice I would offer would be to always keep an open mind, ask a lot of questions when the time's appropriate, do a lot of listening, but not to be afraid if you don't know something to say, "Can you go over that once again?" or to give your opinion. Always to express your opinion if you feel like something's not right to respectfully respond and say, "What about...Have you considered this, or that?" But to be a good communicator, a good listener, always remain optimistic, and always be prepared. Like I said earlier, to me it's important. It's not necessary, but for me I try to lead by example. When I put my uniform on every day, I put it on fully, I wear it with pride, I take pride in being in this position, and I expect everyone who represents the fire department when they put their uniform on to do the same. Similarly, I've instituted a random alcohol and drug testing program for our members, something I'm very proud of. It's worked very well for the department, for the community, and I'm certainly one of the members that's tested. I would never, again, ask someone to do something that I wouldn't be willing to do myself. I think that's important; it gains you a lot of credibility and a lot of buy-in from your subordinates.

**Caption:** What was your most difficult day as fire chief?

**JHW:** There have been very much rewarding days – very many rewarding days – there's also been some tough days. Some of them surround, you know, difficult decisions regarding discipline. I'm known as someone that disciplines on a regular basis. I'm also someone that rewards the people that go above and beyond. But I think, just as I do with my boys at home, it's important to articulate clearly what the expectations are and if someone steps over the line, it's important to let them know that there will be consequences. And so that's something that had not always been very clear in our department, I think it was the source of frustrations. But discipline's always difficult, giving people bad news, but I'm also one that you pay the price if you're out in the penalty box and then you move on. People make mistakes. The main thing is if you learn from them. Aside from that, I think the couple of most difficult days for me have been related to injuries. And we've had two fairly major injuries. Fortunately, both members have made recoveries – full recoveries, on their way to full recoveries – but we had one member at a fire who had fallen down, his mask was removed – knocked off his face – and we had some significant respiratory injuries. And at first it looked like he may not have been able to survive those injuries. Fortunately, he was able to do so. Not quite back to work, but he's going to be back very soon and that makes me feel good. And then another person who had a wall collapse and suffered significant musculoskeletal injuries, also still recovering but will be expected to come back to work. Those are always difficult. I wear this black band; I never take it off since I've been the Chief, that says, "Everyone goes home." We work in a very dangerous occupation and to me, I really want to make sure when people come to work – they're giving a lot of themselves – I want to make sure they're safely returned to their families. So anytime there are major injuries, it's something that always is difficult for me to deal with.

**Caption:** What was your best day as fire chief?

**JHW:** I've had so many great days and being in this department and particularly being the Chief of this department, I would say, for me, one of the proudest days and one of the best days was when we had our first promotional ceremony after years of not having promotional exams for our members. There were...there was about a ten to 12 year period of time where no promotional examinations were given and we had members that did a great job, but they were always acting at the next level because of some litigations surrounding the certification. There were groups of people that didn't agree on how the list should be ranked and scored. And so because of that – and that was independent of this administration – because of that, we were very much interested third-party members, trying to break through. And we were finally able to get some resolution to that issue and get their promotional exams back on track, which was...really, greatly improved morale, it greatly improved the accountability to have regular, permanent officers in place, and since I've been Chief, it's pretty historical. I've been able to promote approximately 200 Lieutenants, 90 Captains, and 30 Battalion Chiefs as well as about 20 fire inspectors and about five fire investigators. And because there was a backlog, that's why you see those large numbers. So, just before I was Chief, I was Training Director and was privileged to see about 450 new recruits through our training academy. But to me, the most rewarding time was when I was able to pin the badges on those people that had worked really hard and had persevered through a period of time when the department was unable to give promotional examinations and to see how proud they were and how proud their families were. A real sense of achievement and that's definitely something that sticks with me as one of my proudest days.

**Caption:** How have you balanced your personal and professional life?

**JHW:** So, I'm the mother of three boys a very proud mother of three boys. And I know when I interviewed for this job with the mayor, at first I was unsure about the timing because right now they're 16, 13, and ten, but you subtract six years and they were much younger. And I was very concerned about how I would be able to balance the very important role of mother and take on the added responsibility of being the Fire Chief in the city and county of San Francisco. Having looked back, it was a much better fit than I thought. I received a lot of support from some family and some friends and now and all the way along from my boys. They have always inspired me, always encouraged me and they're proud of their mom. And I think initially when I got this job, a lot of people said, "What a great role model you are for young women." And I agree with that, but I think equally so for young me, for them – for young men – to see that women can do and can be in positions of leadership in a traditionally male dominated field. So I'm blessed with a great family, a great support network, I have a great team of people here. My Deputies, my Command Staff, everyone is very supportive of my role as a mom. And they know if there's a game I need to go to, or a field trip I need to chaperone or I want to chaperone, that I'm going to go to that. And it usually works out. I pride myself on trying to spend as much time as I can with the boys, you know, in the evenings, on the weekends. I've done some coaching on some of their teams, and trying to stay as involved as I can. Not ever easy. It's...everyday it's a juggling act. I usually get about

five to six hours of sleep during the week, catch up a little bit on the weekends, but my family is very important to me. And I've been – like I said – I've been very fortunate and blessed to have such a great supportive network of family and friends to help me raise three wonderful boys.

**Caption:** How do you remain physically active?

**JHW:** The demands of this job are very difficult, although I think it's imperative that, to keep an active mind and body you need to, when you get out of the office continue to be physically active. So for me, it is a priority. It's not always the easiest thing to do every day, but typically I will...I'm in a volleyball league, so I play volleyball. It's a social but it's also a physically active activity for me. I'm also into swimming and jogging and, like I said, I coach basketball for my youngest sons' basketball league. So I try to keep as active as I can. And I think it's important to do that, again, not only for physical health but for a job like this, for your mental health.

**Caption:** Is there anything else you would like to share?

**JHW:** I would just like to say as Chief of the San Francisco Fire Department that I am proud to be serving with such a wonderful and dedicated group of men and women in this department, a diverse group of people serving our community. And just to say that my hat is off to anyone that chooses a career in the fire service because it truly is a calling and there are a lot of sacrifices that are made; there are birthdays, there's holidays that are missed, and in the course of one's career in the fire service or in public safety. So I'm just grateful to my colleagues through the country, throughout the nation, and throughout the world that choose to be public safety and first responders, firefighters, paramedics, EMTs, and our partners in law enforcement for the good work that they do each and every day and to thank them for all that they do.