



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Sunrise, Sunset

One of the most memorable songs in the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” is entitled Sunrise, Sunset. Sung by the male lead the tune waxes nostalgically about watching the beginning and the ending of things and realizing that there is a very short time frame between the two.

On a day-to-day basis we seldom get a chance to really think about that. Our idea in the fire service of sunrise is getting up and going to work. Our days are so full of activity that we aren't thinking of how fast they are going by. If you are a chief officer on staff or in charge, sunset is an activity that may or may not occur before you are able to pull yourself out of the office and head home. For many people sunset is not the end of a day, but rather a dividing line between work at home and other meetings or things to be done at night. It is not looked at as being at the end of activity. In many fire stations in this nation it is time to set down for a meal that is better than the best gourmet restaurant in town, fully recognizing that the members that share that meal could be up all night responding to the community's needs for emergency services

However, every once in a while you get a chance to see that we do have the same phenomenon in our profession. Sometimes we do get to see beginnings and endings within a very short amount of time. We have career beginnings and we have career endings. Some of them are spectacular; some of them are merely mundane. All of them are personal. You can't have any of the events occur in a fire service career without it dealing with somebody's personal point of view or perspective. Except even that observation is hard to see on a day-to-day basis.

I recently however, had a very interesting opportunity. I saw it all happen in one day. It was probably just a case of very bizarre timing. On the other hand it may have happened in other locations but in my entire career I have never quite had a day quite like it. It started off with an opportunity to meet with a Command Officer who was asking me to give him additional information on how to be better prepared for a promotional exam that is coming up in the future. In other words, this particular individual is not at the beginning or the end of his career, he is standing on one of the rungs on his career ladder. We went to lunch to discuss the usual issues, i.e. how to prepare for an oral, complete a resume, and other matters

However, during my discussions with him I did start discussing how things used to be and was somewhat amazed to note that he knew a lot about the way things used to be. When I asked him how he had such a perspective he indicated that a great deal of the information had been handed down to him from the older members of his department. Interestingly enough during this same day we were invited to participate in two separate events that involved this fire department that were literally sunrises and sunsets.



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In the first case we were given the opportunity to witness the graduation of approximately 51 young men and women who were members of a fire-exploring academy. They don't get much younger than that. Here was a group of individuals who were aspiring to know more about the fire profession. In fact many of them may not actually become firefighters at all. But they wanted to know more about the job. They were standing at the bottom rung. Just before going to the graduation we were invited to go over to a fire station and to give a last goodbye's to a captain, a firefighter and an apparatus operator whose careers were being ended for a variety of reasons. In one case it was an excess of almost 30 years of experience and in another case it was because of a heart problem.

As I observed the ceremony that day I was also startled to see individuals come back into the room to say goodbye to these individuals who have been retired for a long time. In one case he had been gone for over twenty years. That is way beyond the sunset. What I saw there though was an example of why this profession has such a strong sense of its own legacy. Here standing in the same room was literally five generations of firefighters.

I define those five generations as want-to-be's, soon to be's, I am-one and it's time to go.

There in the kitchen were rosy-cheeked youths, rough and tumbled, balding old men and they all had the same reason for being there.

What really brought it all home to me was the stunning realization that at one point in time, I and most of the members in that dining room had all stood in the other person's shoes. For example, the captain who was retiring, I was his training officer when he entered the fire service. One of the chief officers that were there had been my platoon commander when I was an apparatus operator, also standing in that room was a lot of people that could not truly be seen. The reason they couldn't be was because they were ghosts. But they were ghosts with names.

Of course I am referring to those had been with us and had gone on into other fates in life such as premature death, accidents, and for that matter some had expired of old age. Some were still alive, but not able to be with us that day. My belief is that nobody ever truly dies as long as someone remembers his or her name. If my premise holds true than in that particular day we had several hundred people there celebrating the fact that one of our members is now moving onto a new plateau. It was the life cycle of the fire service. Beginnings – middles and ends. But the end for one is the beginning for another. Therefore, instead of it being a cycle it is really like a double helix. That different people's career paths intertwined at different points in their lives. As the helix winds tighter and tighter it creates strength of its own. Age and wisdom supported by youth and vitality. The common link among all of those was the same commitment and courage that made the fire service into an occupation for which so many generations have aspired.



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Just prior to that day I had had the unique opportunity to be the keynote speaker for the recruit academy in another community. I almost had a difficult time ending my speech that day because as I looked out at the fresh scrubbed young faces of future firefighters I had this pang of jealousy. It really boiled down to the fact that if I could have traded places with any one of those young men and women sitting around that room I would have done so in a heartbeat. It is just a good thing there wasn't the devil lurking behind a stage curtain to make me an offer or I am likely to have taken it.

In the context of this column, I would like to make a point that we really need to have a tremendous amount of respect for each and every step on the career ladder. We should enjoy it when we are there and respect it when we move on. We should celebrate all of our sunrises and sunsets with a clear recognition that it means there is always another day. For surely as the sun goes down in the west and comes up in the east each generation of firefighter will pass across the landscape leaving contributions, sacrificing and yet simultaneously benefiting from an occupation that is among the most challenging and simultaneously the most rewarding that any person could aspire to achieve.

The Fiddler on the Roof has nothing on the fire service. We too have a very short time frame and yet, a long legacy of linking one generations successes to the succeeding generations capabilities. We can only hope that it continues for decades to come.