

TAKING THE HEAT

The First Women Firefighters of New York City

By Bann Roy

DISCUSSION GUIDE



They faced death threats on the job—from some of the men they worked with. With the story of Captain Brenda Berkman of the Fire Department of New York at its core, *TAKING THE HEAT* explores the history of women firefighters in America and the price these women paid to serve their communities





FROM THE FILMMAKERS

How many of us would go to work if we received telephoned death threats from anonymous co-workers? And if we somehow mustered up the courage to show up for work, how many of us would remain there if the threats continued? What if we had the choice between a highly-paid, safe job, for which we have the necessary training and qualifications on one hand, and on the other, a modestly-paid job which is dangerous and, more importantly, where none of our co-workers want to work with us? What would you choose to do?

Brenda Berkman faced these choices in her life. A lawyer, she chose to become a firefighter with the New York City Fire Department. At that time she was, and to a considerable degree still is, the focus of animosity unleashed by male firefighters. "The men can never forgive her," a retired male firefighter told me in an interview. Their anger toward Brenda goes back to 1982, when she became the person to break through one of the toughest gender barriers. Her actions made it possible for other women to join the New York City Fire Department.

The film you are about to watch examines the dismantling of that gender barrier, and the events that followed. It will show you both sides of the argument about women in this non-traditional occupation. You will see how Brenda and a few extraordinary women rose to the occasion and stood up against the relentless harassment, and survived. You will see how their lives were changed, and in turn, how they made a difference for future generations.

Even though many of the events chronicled in the film happened more than two decades ago, many of the issues raised by those events still remain to be addressed. Today, in a country that is tilting dangerously towards hard-line conservatism, terms like *women's rights* and *feminism* are often spoken in a hushed voice, as we retreat from some hard-fought victories from the earlier decades. Since September 11th, 2001, I have been asked many times why I continued making this film (we began filming in 1997). My answer is that after the horrific events of that day, it is perhaps even more important that we recognize the service of the women firefighters of New York. These women, who have worked side by side with the men, have faced more than their fair share of danger. It's time we honor their contribution. It would be wrong for us, as a society, to forget people like Brenda who have expressed, through their lived experiences, a belief that everyone should get a fair opportunity.

As these pioneer women firefighters retire one by one, we run the risk of losing their stories forever. Their against-all-odds can-do attitude is what defines the essence of the American spirit. They have taught me so much about life. I hope other people learn from them too.

-Bann Roy, Filmmaker, *TAKING THE HEAT*

THE FILM

Recounting history can sound deceptively simple: In 1977, Brenda Berkman sued to force New York City to develop a job-related entry exam for firefighter. Today she is one of the highest-ranking women in the FDNY. But the journey of Berkman and her peers was far from simple. *TAKING THE HEAT* chronicles the personal as well as public successes and setbacks of the women who broke the gender barrier of the FDNY. The result is a compelling documentary film about the complex real-life drama that results from challenging social norms.

As the women featured in *TAKING THE HEAT* reflect on their experiences, including harassment that ranged from scorn to death threats, viewers are invited to reflect on the dynamics of leadership and the process of bringing about change. The resulting film is a compelling testament to both the cost of and the satisfaction that comes from fighting for justice.

People Who Appear in *TAKING THE HEAT*

FDNY FIREFIGHTERS

Brenda Berkman, Captain
Rochelle Jones, Battalion Chief
Patricia Fitzpatrick, Firefighter, Retired
Cecilia Cox, Firefighter, Retired
Katrina Cannon, Firefighter, Retired
Lorraine Cziko, Firefighter, Retired
Ella McNair, Lieutenant
Eileen Gegan, Firefighter
Anna Schermerhorn-Collins, Lieutenant
Ken Scott, Firefighter, Retired
Brian McMorrough, Firefighter, Retired
John Hart, Former Chief of Department
Tom Ryan, Firefighter, Retired
Nicholas Mancuso, Former President, Uniformed Firefighter's Association
Timothy McKinney, Captain, Retired
Jim Brennan, Firefighter, Retired
Elbert Washington, Firefighter, Retired and Former President, Vulcan Society
Frank Miale, Battalion Chief, Retired?
Paul Washington, Lieutenant and President, Vulcan Society
Tim Devine, Firefighter

COMMENTATORS AND OBSERVERS

Ken Gordon, Brenda's ex-husband
Gloria Steinem, feminist activist and writer
Laura Sager, attorney who represented Berkman in the original lawsuit
Vincent Lee, journalist, New York Daily News
Robert King, Berkman's attorney
William McCardle, expert witness on exercise science
Charlotte Allen, freelance journalist opposed to women becoming firefighters
Terry Golway, author
Neal Hirschfeld, freelance journalist
Pam Elam, women's rights activist, legislative aide, and Brenda's ex-partner
Elizabeth Holzman, former New York City Comptroller and Brooklyn District Attorney
Maureen McFadden, Vice President, Legal Momentum
Linda Willing, Lieutenant retired from Boulder, CO FD and co-founder of Women in the Fire Service





BACKGROUND INFORMATION

STATISTICS

- In the United States today, there are approximately 296,850 career firefighters and more than 800,000 volunteer firefighters (Source: National Fire Protection Association)
- In the United States today, there are approximately 6,000 women career firefighters and 35,000 to 40,000 women volunteer firefighters. (Source: Women in the Fire Service)
- Today, women comprise less than 1 percent of the FDNY.

TIMELINE

1964 – Congress passes the Civil Rights Act prohibiting discrimination in employment based on gender.

1977 – For the first time women are allowed to apply to become New York City firefighters. Brenda Berkman applies; She and 90 other women take and fail a newly-designed entrance exam for the FDNY

1979 – Berkman brings suit to have exam changed.

1982 – Federal District Court Judge Charles Sifton rules that the exam is not job-related and biased against women, and must be redesigned. Approximately 50 women pass the new exam. Forty-six women are hired as FDNY firefighters and enter the training academy. United Women Firefighters is founded by women attending the academy.

1983 – Berkman and Zaida Gonzalez are fired, but are eventually reinstated with back pay.

1987 – In a second related court case, the appeals court substantially revises Sifton's 1982 decision, declaring that an exam based on speed (which tends to favor men) could be used in place of an exam that included measurements of stamina (which women compete more equally with men).

1992 – Berkman forces the FDNY to bring charges against a doctor who groped her; he is eventually forced to resign, but is not prosecuted. Of the 10,000 FDNY firefighters, only 33 are women.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

BEFORE VIEWING

- Describe what it means to be a man. Describe what it means to be a woman. Is it important to you that these two categories remain distinct? Why or why not? Should the distinctions apply to the workplace, with some jobs reserved for women and some for men? Why or why not?
- Get a picture of a firefighter in your head. What does that picture look like? Does that picture change after you view the film?

AFTER VIEWING

GENERAL

- If you could ask Brenda Berkman or any of the other firefighters in the film one question, what would you ask? Why?

SEEKING JUSTICE

- What did you learn about leadership from this film? How does the experience of leaders differ from the experience of those who are involved as followers or supporters?
- What did you learn from this film about how social change happens? What conditions and circumstances make change possible? What hinders change?
- Where did the women featured in this film find inspiration? Where do the people who are working for justice in your community find inspiration? What might you do to help support them?
- When firefighter organizations, including the union, publicly opposed the women, why did the Vulcan Society (a group of African American firefighters) accept them? Do you see a link between the department's treatment of women and the low numbers of ethnic and racial minorities in the FDNY?
- What is the difference between hazing and harassment? Did you believe the women's descriptions of what happened to them? Why or why not?
- If you had been subject to the kind of harassment described by the women in *TAKING THE HEAT*, what would you have done? Why?
- Berkman wryly observes, "The guys who were [harassing the women firefighters] were supposedly America's heroes." What do you think she was suggesting about heroism and her own expectations about becoming a firefighter?

GENDER ISSUES

- In your view, why has the FDNY been so resistant to including women? What, exactly, is at stake?
- Writer Charlotte Allen suggests that accepting women as firefighters threatens manhood. Do you agree or disagree? What specifically is the threat? What are the consequences of opening traditionally male professions, like firefighting, to women?
- What did the women say about why they wanted to be firefighters? How different or similar are their reasons from male peers? After seeing this film, assuming that you could meet the physical qualifications, would you want to work in the FDNY? Why or why not?
- Review the various arguments around the firefighter exams. Which ones make the most sense to you? Why? If some people believe that women are physically too weak to do the job, then is a woman's passing the test evidence that those people are wrong or evidence that the test is too easy? What does it say about the difficulty of the test that the original FDNY women took that it was based on incumbent male firefighters? Was it reasonable to expect that logical and/or legal arguments would persuade opponents? Are your attitudes about gender roles based primarily on logic?
- Critics have cited the absence of women firefighters among the firefighters who died in 9/11 as evidence that women are ineffective as firefighters. Others cite the same fact as evidence of discrimination that has kept the number of women in fire service extremely low. How do you interpret the evidence?



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as individuals and as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- Review children's books in your local schools and libraries. Are there women pictured as firefighters or in other nontraditional jobs (that is, jobs in which less than 25 percent of the total employed are women)? Do they use inclusive terms like "firefighter" instead of "fireman" and "police officer" in place of "policeman"? Report on what you find as a way to start a dialogue about the impact of providing or not providing diverse images. Find ways to supplement available images as needed.
- Meet with women in the fire service to find out what they need in terms of community support. Make a plan of action to help meet those needs.
- Meet with municipal officials and leaders from your fire department to develop recruiting strategies that would help your fire department reflect the demographics of your community.
- Find venues to arrange for family screenings of **TAKING THE HEAT**, including Girl Scout troops, Boys & Girls Clubs, Girls Inc., women's centers, churches, high schools and so on. Arrange for facilitation that helps parents talk with their children about the film.

For additional outreach ideas, visit itvs.org, the website of Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit to pursuing one item from the brainstorm list.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION

Websites

www.wfsi.org – Women in the Fire Service is a networking organization. Their website includes updates on current cases of discrimination, overviews of such issues as recruiting and firehouse design, and a brief history of women in firefighting. Use their state-by-state report to find out how many women are working in fire service in your state.

www.afscme.org/wrkplace/wrfaq08.htm – The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, a labor union, provides a fact sheet about and links related to women in nontraditional jobs.

www.work4women.org/ – Work4Women provides how-to information for women interested in finding employment in nontraditional jobs.

www.usfa.fema.gov/ – The website of the U.S. Fire Administration provides general information about fire services, including census data on departments across the United States.

Golway, Terry. *So Others Might Live: A History of New York's Bravest—The FDNY from 1700 to the Present* (Basic Books, 2002).

TAKING THE HEAT WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT LENS ON MARCH 28, 2006 AT 10:00 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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