

Gainesville Fire-Rescue
The Story of the Table – Station 1
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Last year as our shift sat at one of our many meals together, I noticed our dining table. The table that came with the station in 2000 had weathered all it could stand. To be fair, not much more could be expected of a piece of furniture. It was chipping, curling and rough like the bark of a tree. The abuse over the years had taken its toll. The dining table of a firehouse is THE most important part of any firehouse. It's the main connection to our families at home. We break bread at least 3 times per shift, we train and collaborate with one another during the day. But most of all, we spend time with each other. The dining table bonds our shifts as families. It gives the opportunities to let rookies sit and absorb the wisdom and knowledge of the veteran before him. We sit and share our lives and what our families have done during our 48 hours off duty. Without this central meeting spot, a firehouse would just be a job instead of career of family.

I felt it was time that we had something that reflected the men and woman that serve this great city. I asked permission to commission a fire themed table. It's a tradition to have a custom table for each fire station. Assistant Chief James approved the project blindly, giving me the ability to create something appropriate. Over the next several weeks, I researched and redrew many concepts. Most seemed cliché, others were either over the top or just plain....plain. Then I thought about not just the department but the city itself. We are the Medal of Honor Host City. Many of our firefighters have donated hundreds of hours of their time to the program so that every April we can make this city better than before. I felt that this was the foundation of the theme. From that moment I made a challenge to build our table in that honor. You see, we will never be the heroes or experience the wonders and horrors of those fine recipients. But we have many similarities. We love our country, we love our brothers in arms, and we love to serve. After some thought, I knew I could never represent the valor of these fine men that received the Congressional Medal of Honor, but I could symbolize what all the great men and woman of this department have done for years. *Do it right, do it for the right reasons, and demonstrate what is being Gainesville firefighter.*

My first thought was to not take the easy way out. If you chose this profession, you're choosing a commitment, the sacrifice of your time and of your family. You are challenged to make life and death choices. The best way to represent that was to make this by hand with no bolts, screws or fasteners. Since I have never built a table, I was in for a surprise of this strategy. So I taught myself the craftsmanship of old school joinery. This was a reflection of the "journey" of our career. Our training, learning and leadership is built by hand each day. There is no app for our job or responsibilities. We hone those skills by successes and mistakes. There's no shortcut for an excellent firefighter. This reflected my vision of the table. I chose to build it the hard way.

For a custom table, the preferred medium is a hardwood such as oak, maple or walnut. These are expensive and luxurious woods with intricate grains and patterns. They make

for beautiful fine furniture and showcase the craftsmanship of their creators. So I chose dimensional pine lumber from the local lumber yard. First, I am no craftsman. Second, my budget was small but most of all, pine represents the best of our people. In the best light, we are plain ordinary people. We are not rocket scientists, Nobel Peace Prize winners or world leaders. What we are can be compare to pine lumber. You can find us anywhere, people know who we are and what we do. We are all around you. We hold the structures up in town. We make up your homes. Though we are not "exotic", we are strong, renewable and dependable. The soft wood of pine is like our souls. We would never admit that we as firefighters are soft inside. But the empathy and caring of my brothers is unsurpassed. When the citizens of this city are in need, I have witnessed time and time again the effort of helping people beyond job requirements so pine was the obvious choice: Strong, easy to work with, and readily available for whatever is needed.

There are over 80 boards of 2x10 lumber in this table. Each and every board was ripped, planed, jointed, laminated, sanded and stained by hand. Everything is held together with dowels, mortise and tendons, half laps, finger joints, glue and dovetails - these too were by hand. I learned the meaning of a handheld planer. I found that making a mortise perfectly square with a mallet and chisel in a 4 x 6 beam was daunting at best. I learned that laminating four 8 foot boards to clamp together was a race against time.

Again, these are metaphors for who we are. Each member of this department is put together by hand. We teach the young responsibility, dedication, commitment, perseverance, fortitude and compassion. These are painstakingly done one-on-one. The time and effort to mold the recruit is only rewarded with the firefighter they become. It's not easy to teach someone to walk into harm's way every shift. I thought that was deserving of my time to dedicate.

All the beams, legs, stretchers and top were made from scratch. The base itself was designed with 4x4 and 4x6 finished lumber. It's practical, robust, sturdy and reliable. This too reflects our department. A single 2x10 could never support a shift's meal just as a single fireman could never extinguish a structure fire alone. But if you shape, level, join and glue the many as one... You have the strongest beam to uphold anything you could put on it. This base is of simple pine lumber. But it was created to be the symbol of brotherhood and professionalism that we bring every day.

The top was a challenge all of its own. I felt this had to be one of a kind. Our department is one of a kind. I have been told by chiefs across Texas including Dallas, Ft Worth, Arlington and Plano that Gainesville is a "real department". The members before us laid a legacy before our feet that is almost impossible to live up to. This deserves their respect. I choose to hand burn stripes of the flag but make them perfectly square when they were joined with the other pieces. These burnt boards symbolize the tolls of the job. It's every 24 hour shift away from our families, the late night and early morning calls we respond to; the damage and pain we are responsible for mitigating and finding solutions. Each shift burns us little by little. The red hose was taken out of service from our department to become the red line. We are willing to bleed for others when there's no one else to help. There is over 18 gallons of clear epoxy that encapsulates this American flag. It is 1 inch

thick and had to be poured 1/8 inch at a time. This is not different than how we cope with our careers. Layer by layer we learn to protect ourselves. We coat our armor to the stresses and pressures of the job, the lack of sleep, working a 48 hour shift when needed. It's also the protection of our brothers. We lean on each other every day. We look out for each other every day. We are another family that protects our own, day by day. If you ever get to see this table up close, pay attention to the clear coat. I prepped each layer with a specific defect. In time, the layers will pull apart and tiny fractures will appear. As with all us firefighters, over time our best protection will falter. All the effort made for perfection will give to pressure and time. Once started as crystal clear resin (recruit) will so wear and tear over time with the job (veteran).

In summary, this dining table is a symbol of the department and the individuals that have had the honor of working at Gainesville FD. Everything you need to learn about a firefighter has been personified in this object. I spent over a year of my spare time learning the craft in order to tell this story. Many, many times I was told "you're wasting your time" or "you're doing it the hard way" and "no one really cares if you do it old school", but I did. The day we finally brought it to the Gainesville Fire Department Station 1, everyone realized what it meant and that's all I will ever need. I love my department and those that make it what other departments only dream of..... family.

