

Brian Williams looks back on being a volunteer fireman and the wildfire of good he hopes to set now

You may find that making a difference for others makes the biggest difference in you.

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NBC Nightly News' Brian Williams loves to help firefighters. And on Make a Difference Day, there are thousands of opportunities for you to help others. / David Yellen for USA WEEKEND

Written by

BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor and managing editor of 'NBC Nightly News' and 'Rock Center'

When I was a kid, it was not uncommon to get pulled out of my warm bed on a cold winter night and thrown in the back of the car. And I loved it.

My father was a fire buff. Whenever a big fire broke out in our town, he had to go see it. And I had to go with him. Those memories are still vivid: I remember the icicles hanging off the helmets of the firefighters during a particularly big fire on a bitter cold night. At a young age, I saw the great gallantry and bravery the job of firefighting requires. In my own way, I placed firefighters above all others in society. I still do. I guess it's hero worship, in its purest form. So it's not surprising that on the day I became eligible, I signed up to be a volunteer firefighter in my hometown of Middletown, N.J. Fighting fires

isn't for everybody, but for me, it was the most pleasing act of volunteerism. It was tactile, tangible, and it paid huge dividends. It ties directly to your community and your neighbors.

My firehouse was a modest engine company — three engines, three garage doors and about 30 of the best men I've ever known. We fought all the usual fires that break out in the suburbs: brush fires, car fires, dumpsters, dryers, light fixtures — and worst of all, the occasional house, already in flames when we arrived. I remember one such house fire — the structure was fully involved with flames and smoke. I was wearing a breathing apparatus, conducting a search on my hands and knees, when I felt something warm, squishy and furry on the floor of a closet. I instinctively tucked it in my coat. When I got outside, I saw two small eyes staring up at me, and I returned the 3-week-old (and very scared) puppy to its grateful owners.

I miss fighting fires every day. I miss everything about it — the sights, the smells, the equipment, the urgency — but mostly the camaraderie. I keep my fire helmet in my office at 30 Rock here in New York as a constant reminder of who I used to be and what I used to do. Mostly, I miss the service of it. Even on days when we answered no alarms, I was still able to say, "I served today. I was there, had I been needed by my neighbors."