

# Rachel Camacho

My name is Raquel "Rachel" Camacho and I have been with Orlando Fire Department going on 30 years. I have been a firefighter for OFD for going on 25 years (Class of 2.8.99). I have been asked to share my story and I share it with the hopes that I help just one person out there that might be struggling today.



I was a very young Communications Specialist (OFD Dispatcher), getting hired at the ripe young age of 22. I had no idea what was in store for me. I had worked as a police dispatcher in another county for 6 months and got lucky getting hired with the City of Orlando. I remember all the Supervisors talking about how young I was, and honestly - I looked up to all of them as moms or aunts! I worked in the Communications Center that was on the top floor of old Fire Station One. I remember being in the main kitchen one evening, talking with a seasoned Lieutenant who asked if I ever considered "coming into the field." It was as though he said that statement in Chinese. I NEVER thought that and I never dreamed in a million years I had the capabilities of being an Orlando firefighter. I cannot remember when I implemented a plan to do it, but I worked dispatch full time and eventually put myself through EMT and fire standards.

Fast forward to about 4 years on the job, and I remember vividly the party lifestyle I took on. Back in the day, there was Long Neck Night (which I started attending in my dispatch years) and I drank and carried on with the best of them. I remember one morning, my Lieutenant making a comment about how I was frequently staying the night before shift after a night of partying. I was like - OH CRAP - someone is noticing... I better stop that! I was staying at the fire station the night before because I was fearful of being late for shift after drinking and partying into the night...I lived like 2 counties away.

In my first 11 years as an Orlando Fire Department firefighter, I was married twice and had multiple extramarital affairs. I am not proud of that, but I tell that part of my story to warn the new folks that these things can happen. I had no sense of morals or values. At the time, if you asked me about those subjects, I probably had very strong opinions about them.

Also, by 11 years on the job, I realized my drinking had really got out of hand. It was not the kind of out of hand that involved DUIs or wrecking cars, ok maybe I wrecked one truck. But it involved the out of control drinking that I realized when I tried to stop, I couldn't stay stopped. I had normalized my drinking and so did my peers (those included friends off and on the job). I was introduced to a 12-Step program, which I am still involved with today. I have been clean and sober since 8.21.2010 and as of this article, that is 13 years.



In 2018, at approximately 3:30am, the fire station tones went off and we were dispatched to an apartment fire. It was a multiple alarm fire. The fire was in our 2nd due, and on our way, we could tell it was a “real fire” because communications told us there were multiple calls coming in. That ALWAYS gives us the idea that the fire is a true fire.

We arrived as the 2nd engine to lay a handline and work our way to the long end of the building. The fire building was almost fully involved, 3 floors appeared to be on fire. The area of the structure we were assigned, was far enough away from the main body of the fire, that there was no smoke and no fire anywhere in the breezeway/stairwell where we were deploying our hose. Out of nowhere, a sudden and fiery explosion occurred right above where I was working. There was a loud bang, like a shotgun had been fired right in front of me. I had no idea what just happened. I suddenly had this feeling as though I stepped into a hot oven. The lighting was poor where we were standing (myself and my Lieutenant) but I didn't think I was on fire nor did I see my gear charred or damaged. We were working on the 3rd floor landing, so we began to make our way to the bottom floor. It was there, in the tower truck's scene lights, that another fire personnel could see my face had soot on it and my helmet was covered in soot and insulation. He said, “Rachel! Your face got burned!” And by this time, I am very uncomfortable and hot and want out of my bunker gear. While working on that 3rd floor landing, I was fully dressed out in my bunker gear, with the exception of having my Nomex hood over my head, my SCBA mask on my face, and my firefighting gloves on. We had not gotten to the part of our work where those things would be essential to have on to fight fire. Again, we were not working in a hostile fire environment. The breezeway was clear and not a trace of smoke to be seen. I was walked over to the rescue to have them check me out and we discover that my hands had been burned. Later, we learned my face was burned and my hair was singed. I took in enough toxic gases, that my blood gases came back abnormal and had to be put on oxygen for 12 hours.

I spent a day and a half on the Burn Unit at ORMC. That experience is quite foggy. I had many many visitors and well wishes. I was on heavy narcotics. I had a lot to deal with. I can say that I left the hospital thinking, “this isn't so bad, I got this.” Oh, and did I mention? Ironically, I had volunteered FOR YEARS in the burn community... but nothing prepared me for my own experience!! wish I could tell you that my recovery from my burn injuries went without a hitch. I wish I could tell you that I don't know what it's like to wake up every morning filled with anxiety. What I can tell you is, that the burn clinic experience was amazing. I saw many student doctors, but I always was followed up in the same visit by the same Attending Doctor and/or ARNP. One day, a resident came in as the doctor for my appointment and he was a former paramedic on the helicopter over by on the coast. He knew a few of my co-workers and we talked about that. He went through his normal checks on my burns and at the end of the appointment, he asked how I was doing. He said something like, “How are you REEEALLY doing?” It was at that moment and after that question that a flood of tears came over me and the emotions I had been holding back came over me and this poor doctor could do nothing more than hug me and tell me that he was going to help me “get some help.”

The Attending Physician came in and he told me he was briefed on what had just happened. He said my burns were healing nicely and that now it was time for some emotional healing. Keep in mind, I have had my recovery support during this process - but even those folks tell us with “outside issues” sometimes more help is necessary. I remember telling him I only wanted to see someone who was familiar with firefighters and burn injuries. That wasn’t a choice I could make. I was sent for mental health help through Workman’ Comp and thankfully I had a wonderful therapist.



What I learned about my burn injury experience was this... I am human. I am more resilient than I am tough. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness. More folks care than I ever imagined. And most importantly, I never ever had to recovery from my burn injury alone. I had the support of the women on Orlando Fire Department, retirees, folks who I didn’t even know knew my name, the Orlando Firefighters’ Benevolent Association, IAFF 1365, Orlando Firefighters Peer Support (before they were Peer Support) and so many more.

If you are struggling today, get help. There are so many ways to get better. If some of my story hits home, by all means call me.

Our job is one of the toughest around... we cannot unsee what we see and we cannot undo the scary situations our jobs put us in. We can support one another and lift each other up. I’ve seen it in action. My story is told to pay it forward... hang in there, love one another, and never ever give up the fight!