

"FACES OF FIRE"



NAME:	Chief W. Keith Brower
DATE OF FIRE:	May 25, 2008
LOCATION:	Loudoun County, Va.
INJURY:	One of his firefighters was severely burned and forced to retire.

"Newer homes, because of the amount of synthetics that are used and because of the diminished construction, are actually less safe than an older home built with dimension construction. That's why residential sprinklers have value. They may not always put the fire out, but they can keep the interior of the building from going to flash over, allowing firefighters to escape without getting burned or worse."

Chief Brower and his firefighters put their lives on the line every day. It's an occupational risk. But when he heard the mayday call as he was approaching a fire one beautiful May weekend in 2008, it felt as if his heart had stopped. The fear that is sparked when a member of his crew is in danger never becomes routine.

"An integral part of my job is to do all that I can to train the members of my department," Brower says. "I feel a sense of personal responsibility to get them home safely to their families and loved ones."

As his firefighters entered the burning house, a fireball erupted on the first floor, trapping them upstairs. The flashover was so intense, their hose line burned in two.

"When the mayday was called, I was approximately seven to eight miles out, and my heart stopped," Brower says. "It literally froze me. It was chilling."

Fortunately, the four firefighters escaped the burning home, but one sustained serious burns and his injuries forced him to retire.

"When I see this firefighter, I don't know what to say," Brower says, "I really feel awkward saying 'Hey, how's it going?' because I know how it's going. He's partly incapacitated. He can't do the job he loves."

Part of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, Loudoun County, Va., where Chief Brower is stationed, is one of the fastest growing, wealthiest counties in the nation. With population growth of nearly 80 percent in the last decade, prosperous new housing developments are everywhere. While fire standards have improved in home construction, new risks have emerged.

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Chief Brower says that installing residential fire sprinklers is especially important in newer homes because modern construction techniques rely on synthetics that burn more quickly, making them more prone to collapse.

“We used to have an expectation that we could fight fire in a building for eight hours or so. In other words, the building would burn down before it would fall down,” Brower says.

ABOUT “FACES OF FIRE”

“Faces of Fire” is a project of the National Fire Protection Association funded by a Federal Emergency Management Agency Fire Prevention and Safety Grant. The campaign is a tool to help people and groups across the country promote the use of automatic fire sprinklers in one- and two-family homes. By containing fires before they spread, home fire sprinklers protect lives and property. The personal stories told through the Faces of Fire campaign show the experiences of those who escaped or lost loved ones in home fires and those whose lives and property were protected by home fire sprinklers.