The Invisible Women Firefighters of Ground Zero

By Kay Miller
Star Tribune - Minneapolis
1-13-2

Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge toward lower Manhattan, Lt. Brenda Berkman edged a borrowed police van through a solid wall of people covered in gray ash and walking in the opposite direction.

The veteran New York City firefighter had taken Sept. 11 off -- election day -- to work as a volunteer for a political candidate. But when she heard that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center, she raced the 15 minutes from her Brooklyn home toward her old Brooklyn firehouse and borrowed gear from a buddy whose crew already had been dispatched to ground zero.

"When I got there, you didn't hear any people," Berkman said. "You heard car alarms and explosions. There was a lot of noise, but you didn't hear people."

For the next two months, she lived and breathed disaster. She worked numbing shifts at ground zero, then retreated, exhausted, to her Ladder Co. 12 firehouse in the Chelsea area of Manhattan to grab a meal or a few hours' rest, counsel other firefighters, plan funerals and try to clear her lungs of the noxious smoke. Every firefighter she knew had developed "the cough."

Of the 343 firefighters who died at ground zero, Berkman knew 250. Some days there were 10 memorial services. It grieved her that she couldn't get to every one. She lost five people from her Chelsea firehouse and six others from her old station in Brooklyn.

Among them was Vinny Brunton, the friend whose gear she had borrowed.

"I knew firefighters were heroes before 9/11," she said.

But it hurts Berkman that women rescuers -- who stood shoulder to shoulder with the men at ground zero -- have been so roundly ignored by the media that the term fireman has returned to vogue.

"Women were down there from the time that the first plane hit the first tower," she said. "Women were trapped in the rubble. Three women rescue workers were killed that day" -- Port Authority Capt. Kathy Mazza, police officer Moira Smith and paramedic Yamel Merino.

"I don't think it's patriotic to show just one group of people on the job," Berkman told three dozen female firefighters from the Twin Cities when she was home over the holidays to visit her mother, Catherine Berkman, in Bloomington.

Berkman, 50, grew up in Richfield and graduated summa cum laude in history from St. Olaf College in Northfield.

But it was her class-action lawsuit that forced the New York City Fire Department to hire female firefighters in 1982. She became the first woman hired by the department, one of 40 to join after the suit. Since then, that number has dwindled to 25 women out of 11,500 firefighters in the department. All 308 firefighters hired since the attack are men, she said.

Berkman said she fears that ignoring the sacrifices of female disaster workers will revive prejudices that women can't do the very work to which she has devoted her adult life.

For four months, Berkman shielded her mother from stories of the danger she was in. But during her visit home, Catherine Berkman overheard answers to questions she hadn't dared to ask, as they met with longtime friends at home, at Knox Presbyterian Church where churchgoers burst into thunderous applause when Berkman was introduced, and at St. Olaf.

Berkman described working under lights at night -- teetering across ladders lashed to a seven-story mountain of smoldering rubble to search for survivors and to douse persistent fires. "If you fell off the ladder, you were dead," she said.

Strong as she is, Berkman shows the strain of physical and emotional trauma. She loses track of time. She cries more easily. Friends say she aged 20 years in four months.

"It's hard to be a 24-7 hero," Berkman said. "There's so much going on -- survivor's guilt, losing immediate family and friends. No one is admitting to the need for counseling. A lot of anger is coming out in ways you don't normally see.

"It's being buried way, way down deep."

Young 'rabble rouser'

It was in Berkman's nature to challenge the status quo. From a young age she found reasons to be a "rabble rouser."

At age 8, she asked her mother to sign her up for Little League in Richfield. Her mother innocently used the gender-neutral "B. Berkman" on the forms. But when the coach learned "B" was a girl, he said he was sorry, she couldn't play.

In those pre-Title IX days, when girl athletes got fields only after the boys' season ended, Berkman ran track and played sandlot ball, tennis, volleyball and touch football.

Too young to vote but taught by her World War II veteran father, Ora Berkman Jr., and civic-minded mother to value the elective process, Berkman arranged a mock election and brought voting machines into Richfield High School for the 1968 Nixon-Humphrey presidential race.

She organized forums for voters to quiz school board candidates. When administrators warned her to keep out of school board elections, Berkman retorted, "That's not going to happen."

At St. Olaf, she was "outspoken on every imaginable subject," wrote Joan Olson, retired St. Olaf archivist and Berkman's friend for 30 years. To obtain a room off the college cafeteria, Berkman and three friends started a phony club, the "Luther League," and invited witty professors to address the group.

"She was the only student I ever knew who called all faculty and administrators by their first names, including [former college President] 'Sid' Rand," Olson wrote. "And if she felt the need to raise an issue, or make a complaint, she would walk into the individual's office and have a face-to-face discussion."

Filing suit

In 1977, Berkman already had a master's degree in history and was finishing her third year of law school at New York University when the city opened the firefighting exam to women. It seemed a perfect fit. To a woman who ran marathons, the physical rigors of firefighting sounded inviting.

"It's a way of serving your country without joining the military and killing people," she said. "It's an active job, so I wouldn't be sitting behind a desk all day long. And it's definitely not boring."

Five hundred women showed up for the written exam. But after a raft of publicity revealed that the department had restructured the physical test to exclude women, only 90 females applied.

All the women failed it -- including Berkman.

"How could there not be a single woman in the city of New York who was capable of being a firefighter?" she asked NYU Prof. Laura Sager, who ran its women's legal rights clinic. But when the pair asked city administrators to revise the test so that it reflected what firefighters actually did on the job, they were rebuffed.

Berkman filed a federal discrimination lawsuit and fought the city for five years. Sager knew it would be a long, resource-intensive fight and enlisted pro bono help from a high-powered Manhattan law firm, Debevoise & Plimpton.

In the end, Berkman won. By then she had been practicing immigration law for four years -- representing, among others, refugees from Afghanistan.

"The smart money was that I would never take this job," she said. She took a 50 percent cut in pay and headed to training school. "That was the beginning of seven years of unrelenting harassment."

Oxygen was drained from her air tanks, death threats were left on her answering machine and her few supportive male colleagues had their tires slashed. Most in her firehouse refused to talk, train or eat with her. Firehouse shifts were lonely for the gregarious Berkman. Worse, she never knew if male colleagues would watch her back in dangerous fires as they did each others'.

At the end of her yearlong probation, the department tried to fire Berkman and another woman for what it called poor performance, sending them back to the fire academy for a test that was supposed to reflect normal duties.

"They set the pressure on the fire hoses so high that the truck was jumping out in the street," Berkman said.

Turning the tide

To survive, Berkman became harder. She lost her Midwestern naivete. And she adapted to the mostly male culture that revered those who -- having been blown out of a burning building -- got up and rushed back in.

Berkman founded United Women Firefighters in New York, becoming its president and speaking around the country to female firefighters, encouraging young women to consider a fire service career.

In 1996, she was made a White House Fellow. That same year, St. Olaf named her a distinguished alumnus. She's one of the first nonchiefs to be accepted into the National Fire Academy's executive fire officer program.

Through her speaking, advising and building of a network of women firefighters, she has become a symbol for other women and the subject of an off-Broadway play, "Firework."

Not long ago, Berkman was on the Staten Island Ferry on her way to a memorial service when she ran into a group of Minnesota tourists. How had the skyline changed, they asked. Momentarily, Berkman turned tour guide, using her comic Minnesotan accent.

"Then, at one point, I couldn't look at it anymore," she said, sounding sickened. "My friends are buried down there."

Taking a stand

It was hard talking about the disaster. But few people back in the Twin Cities would understand better what she had been through than her female firefighter friends.

In the basement of the Green Mill Restaurant in Minneapolis, the women laughed, thumped each others' backs in bear hugs and heartily insulted each other -- razzing those who had ordered pink "girly drinks" instead of beer.

Just 76 of Minneapolis' 473 firefighters are women -- 16 percent -- but that's the highest of any fire department in the nation, said Bonnie Bleskachek, president of the Minnesota Women Firefighters Association. Though far from perfect, leadership in the Minneapolis Fire Department is among the most progressive anywhere, Berkman said.

At first, the women talked around the edges of the 9/11 disaster -- not wanting to press Berkman. Soon, jokes gave way to grim comparisons of what Berkman had seen at ground zero to the dangers they all face.

It took more than a week before the site was cordoned off, Berkman told them. There weren't enough radios, flashlights or trucks because many had been buried with firefighters in the initial collapse. Early on, women assumed added roles:

"We became the grief counselors and the funeral directors, the family liaisons," Berkman said. "In addition to that, we were dealing with our own traumatic experiences down there and those of the men that survived the collapse of the Trade Center."

Words couldn't touch it. So Berkman brought a short film, "Women of Ground Zero," produced by NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, about her experiences and those of other women.

When the film ended, the women sat in the dark, clearing their throats. "So how are you doing?" one asked quietly.
Berkman broke down.

"It's a difficult time to be in the New York City fire service," she said.

"And to be a woman in the fire service.

"Women were part of all of the efforts at ground zero. It was a real eye-opener for women who came in from other areas of the country as part of the search-and-rescue effort to have their efforts totally ignored -- along with the women of New York," she said.

Jean Kidd, one of the first female firefighters hired in Minneapolis, said of Berkman: "It takes a lot of courage for her to say that there were women there," noting that male colleagues could perceive her comments as being disloyal to those who died. "For her to take a stand," Kidd said, "can make her a target for all that energy, that grief, that disgust."

Berkman knows that, but she is resolute. "We made the mistakes after all our previous wars in the United States of not recognizing the contributions of women," Berkman said. "I'm hoping that will not happen with this war effort."