

## **FIREFIGHTER OF THE MONTH DECEMBER 2020**

### **FIREFIGHTER III EDGAR GARCIA**

#### **FIRE STATION 27**

Edgar Garcia was just 13 years old when he became a Fire Explorer. His older brother had been in the program for a few years, so he was curious to see what all the fuss was about. The Garcia family lived in East Hollywood, so once he enrolled, he was assigned to Fire Station 27, just off Cahuenga Blvd. in the heart of Hollywood.

“The ride-alongs really sealed the deal,” recalled Garcia. “There’s just no way to describe it. You have to experience it. Someone call tell you all about what it’s like to be a firefighter, but for me, I needed to see it. Once I got the opportunity to ride out with the crew at 27s, I was hooked. I knew what I was meant to be.”



Garcia is now in his fifth year with the Los Angeles Fire Department. Until May of 2020, he had worked at Fire Station 75 in Mission Hills. This summer, Garcia received the news that Station 27 would be his new assignment. “A position opened up when one of the members there was promoted. I figured I’d put in for it thinking there could be a chance I’d get to come back to where it all started. Luckily enough, it worked out,” shared Edgar.

“I’ve enjoyed every one of my assignments and I’m grateful for what each stop has taught me. But there’s no denying that there’s something rewarding, something special about getting to work in the neighborhood where I grew up,” expressed Garcia.

Since the start of the holiday season, Garcia has also taken on another familiar role, albeit in a more official capacity. His special duty assignment brought him back to Toy Central in Elysian Park – the LAFD’s processing hub for the Spark of Love toy drive program.

Garcia began volunteering with the toy drive at age 14. As a kid, he’d spend every day of his winter break sorting, packing and delivering toys with firefighters. Fast-forward 15 years, and he is now one of Spark of Love’s program leaders – responsible for the coordination and logistics of fulfilling thousands of community toy requests. “Helping with Spark of Love has been one of the greatest joys in my life. Seeing the way the kids’ faces light up when we deliver those toys, there’s just no better feeling,” shared Garcia.

“This toy drive has been going strong for close to 30 years, and we will keep this going as long as there is a need to help families in our communities,” shared Firefighter Michael Marquez, who oversees the LAFD’s Spark of Love operation. Thankfully, the toy drive’s future looks bright with Garcia primed to take the reins one day.

“Firefighter Garcia is a tremendous asset to the Spark of Love program and a big reason why we were able to have another successful season. Edgar has a big heart, an immeasurable work ethic, and a personal responsibility to see this toy drive succeed. He has grown into an incredible leader. Our department is proud of his efforts, and fortunate that he believes so strongly in this program.”

Technically, the Spark of Love will run through the first few weeks of January to try to accommodate late-arriving requests. With the holiday rush behind him, Garcia breathes a sigh of relief knowing that the toy drive was successful in spite of this year’s many challenges. “We were not able to accommodate the massive requests from years past, but thankfully, we were able to meet nearly every community ask, given the huge spike of new recipients. It was a good season. Now we get ready for next year.”



## **FIREFIGHTER OF THE MONTH NOVEMBER 2020**

### **CAPTAIN II JOHN RUEDY**

#### **US&R UNIT, DISASTER RESPONSE SECTION**

If you have ever watched national news coverage of hurricane relief operations and caught a glimpse of LAFD firefighters in the gulf coast, chances are its Captain John Ruedy's handiwork.

Captain Ruedy currently serves as the Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Unit Commander, and the liaison for the LAFD's state and federal US&R task forces. More importantly, he is one of the LAFD's resident subject matter experts on all search and rescue-related issues and operations.

In essence, Captain Ruedy helps manage some of the most advanced US&R personnel and resources in the country. When a neighboring fire agency requests assistance, or the State of California, or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) require specialized disaster response resources, Captain Ruedy answers the call.

His quiet nature and soft-spoken demeanor are a warm contrast to the scope of his responsibilities. Calmly and methodically, Captain Ruedy scales the logistical, technical, apparatus, equipment and personnel resources to the needs of the incident. In many cases, this also involves coordinating the deployment of medical professionals, canine handlers, engineers, and other specialized personnel.

Most recently, Captain Ruedy helped coordinate California Regional Task Force 9's deployment on the North Complex Fire (Plumas, Butte and Yuba counties) to perform the heart-breaking task of searching the vast burned areas for potentially missing persons whom may have been caught in the blaze.

Captain Ruedy spent nine years preparing for his current assignment. He previously served as a US&R task force captain for nine years, where he traveled, trained, and problem-solved on countless disaster deployments. He loves his current role and cannot imagine a more rewarding assignment.

"Working in the US&R arena is different than serving in a traditional firefighting role," shared Captain Ruedy. "As a US&R member, you're going to find yourself in some bizarre and challenging environments. It takes a certain type of person to commit to the extra training and continuous education. We're always learning, always pushing ourselves to improve our knowledge and skillset. These assignments can be extremely demanding, but they can also be very rewarding."

The Ruedy household, which includes his wife of 27 years and his adult daughter and son, love the outdoors. Off duty, you are likely to find them wakeboarding on Lake Powell or Lake Havasu. Captain Ruedy is an L.A. native. He became a firefighter in 1989. He has the honor of serving in the LAFD alongside his brothers Brandon (Captain II, Air Ops) and Brent (Inspector, Valley Industrial Commercial).

## **FIREFIGHTER OF THE MONTH OCTOBER 2020**

### **FIREFIGHTER/PARAMEDIC RHONIE TOPINIO**

#### **FIRE STATION 4**

Rhonie Topinio is living his childhood dream as firefighter and paramedic with the LAFD. The Orange County native remembers the moment he knew he wanted to become a firefighter.

In second grade, members from a nearby fire station paid a visit to Rhonie's school. He recalls being awed by their safety presentation, marveling at their turnout equipment, climbing on the fire truck, but most importantly, he was struck by the firefighters' friendliness. "From that day forward, I knew I wanted to be a firefighter. Nothing was going to change my mind," expressed Rhonie.

As a teen, Rhonie had the opportunity to occasionally ride-along with his uncle, who served at the original Fire Station 4 near downtown L.A. Seeing his uncle and fellow firefighters in action solidified his intent to join the LAFD.

Rhonie is now in his third year with the LAFD, and his second year assigned to Station 4 in the Arts District. "Working at Station 4 is wild," shared Rhonie. "It's such a unique experience because of our great crew, the area we serve, and the surprising sense of community. Between the jails and Union Station, we see a ton of medical calls, and there's never a dull moment. The toughest part is just missing your family after working three, four, or five consecutive days."

According to Captain Gayle Sonoda, Firefighter/Paramedic Topinio is exactly the type of member you want on your team. "He's a hard worker, shows initiative, actively seeks opportunities to learn and improve, and he always seems to have a great attitude - even when he's exhausted," remarked Captain Sonoda.

Off-duty, the married father of two splits his free time between cooking (he loves to cook), and cultivating his daughter and son's athletic careers. Mealtime at the Topinio household is proclaimed to be quite the experience. Rhonie, who is of Filipino and Mexican descent, is low-key famous for combining cultures and flavors in the kitchen.

"So far, so good. Being a firefighter is everything I hoped it'd be," shared Rhonie. "Maybe one day, we'll visit a school and have a similar effect on a future firefighter."

Thanks to Marathon Petroleum, Rhonie and the crew at Station 4 received a \$500 station sponsorship. They plan to apply the sponsorship towards technology upgrades in their apparatus bay.





## **FIREFIGHTER OF THE MONTH AUGUST 2020**

### **FIREFIGHTER/EMT BRIAN THIES**

#### **FIRE STATION 1**

Brian Thies is in his third year as a firefighter/EMT assigned to Fire Station 1 in Lincoln Heights.

After graduating from UC Irvine in 2012 with a degree in business economics, Thies briefly pursued a stint in sports marketing. While there were aspects of the job he enjoyed, Brian found the corporate grind unfulfilling, so he turned his focus elsewhere.

Brian's cousin, a member of the Stockton Fire Department, saw his potential and counseled him towards a career in the fire service.

Firefighting roots run deep in the Thies family, so it was only a matter of time before Brian considered following suit. His father recently retired after a long and illustrious career with the Los Angeles County Fire Department. His brother, and brother-in-law are also firefighters.

Brian recalls the many station visits, ride-alongs, and how his family would often spend holidays and other special occasions at the fire station. In the back of his mind, he somehow knew he'd help carry the tradition forward.

Thies ditched the marketing gig to attend a private fire academy. After graduating, he worked as an emergency medical technician (EMT) for two private ambulance companies. Roughly two year later, Thies was hired by the Stockton Fire Department in California's Central Valley.

In 2016, less than a year after becoming a firefighter in Stockton, Brian received the news that he earned his spot with the LAFD. He is currently assigned to Station 1 in Lincoln Heights, the oldest functional station in the City of Los Angeles.

"I love working at this station. We have an incredible array of diversity in the areas we serve, and the types of calls we respond to. We're right next to the Five (Interstate 5 Highway) and 110, two of L.A.'s busiest freeways. We're close to so much activity near downtown, the L.A. river, and Elysian Park. We get to see brush, structure, and vehicle fires, all sorts of rescue situations - it's never boring," shared Brian. "Plus, our community really seems to appreciate us."

Ask the crew at Fire Station 1 what they think of Thies, and the responses you will hear are "consummate nice guy, great teammate and all-around good dude." According to more than one anonymous source, Brian is also the quiet, but unsuspectingly funny guy, ready to chime in with a targeted quip.

Off duty, you are likely to find Brian reeling in bass off Lake Havasu. Thies is an avid fishing enthusiast that has competed in numerous tournaments. In fact, Brian has hooked his share of trophy bass, placing in the top five in multiple competitions. Given his quiet disposition, he isn't one to boast about his accolades, but he is more than happy to share fishing advice.

Thanks to Marathon Petroleum, Brian and the crew at Station 1 received a \$500 station sponsorship.

# **FIREFIGHTER OF THE MONTH**

## **JULY 2020**

### **FIREFIGHTER/PARAMEDIC CHELSEE BREWSTER**

#### **FIRE STATION 62**

According to Chelsee Brewster, training is the key to succeeding as a firefighter. How she trains is what sets her apart. “It’s more than repetition and muscle memory. Intensity, focus and discipline need to be part of your regimen if you want to make it in the LAFD,” she explained.

Brewster is a firefighter and paramedic assigned to Fire Station 62 in Venice – one of the most eclectic and diverse enclaves in L.A. She earned her current assignment after graduating from the paramedic program at UCLA earlier this summer.

Brewster is a rising star amongst her peers. October will mark her four-year anniversary with the LAFD. She attributes much of her recent success to her career as a Division I collegiate athlete. As captain of the women’s rowing team at San Diego State University, she earned All-American honors while on a full scholarship.

She first considered a career in fire service during her early college years. Her cousin, a member the Los Angeles County Fire Department, helped to guide her towards becoming a firefighter and coached her through the necessary certification processes.

In fact, Chelsee credits her family, especially the women, for influencing and inspiring her to pursue her firefighting dreams. “I come from a line of leaders and difference-makers. My grandmother was a life-long law enforcement officer, and my mom is a public defender. It was not a big shock to them when I announced that I wanted to join the LAFD,” said Chelsee.

Brewster views her decision to become a firefighter as the evolution of her years as multi-sport athlete. “In many ways, I feel like being an athlete really helped prepared me for my career as a firefighter. Not just the physical aspects, but the dedication and mental conditioning aspects. The value of a healthy diet, the grind of waking up early, knowing the difference between being hurt and being injured,” explained Brewster. “Especially the endurance sports, they teach you the importance of mental toughness – how to put your head down and push forward in the face of adversity.”

“You need a little adversity. You need those challenges. You need to have gone through something hard, some type of obstacles in life to build your self-confidence - because confidence is key to being a part of the LAFD. You need to have confidence in your skills and abilities, that you’ve got what it takes to act in those life and death situations when others are counting on you,” added Brewster.

Even though her rowing days are over, Chelsee is still very much an athlete. She enjoys snowboarding, rock climbing, and surfing (which she used to do competitively). She loves exploring nature with her fiancé, whom she is set to marry this fall in a picturesque mountain wedding. Chelsee was honored to be named July’s Firefighter of the Month, and she is excited to apply this month’s sponsorship from Marathon towards new fitness equipment for the members at Fire Station 62.





## **FIREFIGHTER OF THE MONTH APRIL/MAY 2020 INSPECTOR JACOB RAABE**

### **COMMUNITY RISK REDUCTION UNIT**

Fast, accurate, and reliable communication is key to helping our firefighters and our communities cope with the pandemic fallout. Fire Chief Ralph Terrazas and the department as a whole, pride themselves on keeping our communities abreast of changes and challenges during these uncertain times.

The LAFD is now producing multiple informational videos on a monthly basis. The frequency and quality would lead one to believe that the LAFD has an experienced production team churning out content 24 hours per day.

The reality is, these videos are produced in-house by a small, but mighty cadre of firefighters and personnel in the Community Liaison Office. At the center of this operation is Inspector Jacob Raabe.

Officially, Raabe is an Inspector with the LAFD's Community Risk Reduction (CRR) Unit. In this capacity, he is responsible for helping CRR identify and prioritize risks, threats and hazards followed by the implementation and evaluation of strategies to lessen their impact. CRR's collective goal is to enhance community resiliency and improve preparedness with programs like Stop the Bleed, Hands-Only CPR, Home Fire Safety, and Fall Prevention for seniors.

These days, you're more likely to find Raabe filming in the field, or catch him en-route to his next production project. In addition to his PPE, his back seat and trunk are filled with camera gear, lighting and audio equipment, and a live stream kit for field communications.

Raabe personifies the adapt-and-overcome mindset. He credits his inquisitiveness and persistence for problem solving for helping him build his production skillset. In just a few short years, he taught himself how to film, edit, create graphics, field produce, broadcast, and live stream.

"If I see a gap, or opportunity to improve something for our department, my curiosity peaks and I'll go down the rabbit hole looking for a solution," shared Raabe.

When he joined the LAFD in 2008, he could not have foreseen himself in his current role. Now, Raabe's often tapped by LAFD leadership for everything from internal training videos and incident field communications, to live public information updates via social media.

Raabe laments that the challenges surrounding COVID response and safety measures are taxing, and he looks forward to when he can hopefully resume working on more traditional production tasks such as recruit graduations, promotion ceremonies, incident response recaps, and community events.

"I've enjoyed learning about new equipment how to integrate emerging technology into our information sharing capabilities," expressed Raabe. "These skills are coming in particularly handy now that we have to produce COVID-related videos with frequency and short-turnaround. The situation is changing so rapidly, so we're working to stay hyper-vigilant about accurate information."

Inspector Raabe resides in Orange County with his wife and two sons. He carries on his family legacy of rewarding careers in fire service. Raabe's father served 35 years with the Oakland Fire Department. His brother has also served with Oakland FD for 15 years. Prior to serving with the LAFD, Raabe served with the Baltimore City Fire Department, and Mountain View Fire Department in Silicon Valley.

Courtesy of Marathon, Raabe and his CRR teammates will receive a \$500 sponsorship towards the tools, tech, or equipment of their choosing.

## **FIREFIGHTER OF THE MONTH MARCH 2020**

### **SIR ROBERT HABERSHAM IV**

### **INSPECTOR I/PARAMEDIC**

#### **FIRE PREVENTION & PUBLIC SAFETY BUREAU, WEST INDUSTRIAL UNIT/LAX**

For the past two and half years, a lone LAFD inspector has overseen Maintenance and Code Enforcement at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). Coincidentally, his name is as impressive as his scope of responsibility – Sir Robert Habersham IV.

Habersham is an L.A. native, a father, and an inspector for the LAFD's Fire Prevention & Public Safety Bureau, stationed at the West Industrial Unit/LAX. In total, he's spent close to 11 years working at LAX.



With over a decade of service at the airport, he's seen quite an array of incidents and interesting emergency situations. Still, no amount of experience or training could prepare him for the coronavirus fallout. "I've never seen anything remotely close to this," laments Habersham, as he explained how activity at the airport is down nearly 90% due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like all inspectors, his primary objectives are the elimination of fire and life safety hazards, the maintenance of fire protection equipment and systems, the regulation of hazardous materials and hazardous substances, and enforcement of building regulations regarding fire, panic, and explosion safety.

Habersham normally has his hands full inspecting terminals, office buildings, maintenance hangers, storage facilities, and construction projects. And of course, each inspection is as unique as the diverse stream of travelers flowing in and out of LAX each day.

LAX is one of world's busiest transit hubs, accommodating nearly 100 million air travelers per year. The airport's massive 3,500-acre foot print houses nine terminals with more than 130 gates, and more than two million square feet of hangers and cargo facilities.

"Firefighters are universally beloved... with the minor exception of those of us in code enforcement," joked Habersham. "Not everyone is thrilled about a visit from an Inspector. I don't mind though. We have an obligation to our department, and a commitment to everyone passing through this airport to help keep them as safe as possible."

Working with airport leadership, multiple federal agency partners, and countless airlines means Habersham must be equal parts subject matter expert and diplomat. "LAX is an anomaly. It's like a small city with its own unique infrastructure and ecosystem," explained Habersham. "With a worksite this complex, I'm used to conducting around 300 inspections per year. Thankfully, most go pretty smoothly."

"On any given day, I could inspect a 100 square foot maintenance project, or a one million square foot, multi-billion-dollar renovation," expressed Habersham. "The size and scope may change, but the priorities are always the same – making sure the job is completed to code to protect the safety of personnel and travelers."

Now, with the COVID-19 outbreak, nearly all inspections have ground to a halt. "These are challenging times and it's tough to see the way this affects the airport community, because LAX truly is its own community," expressed Habersham. Still, he is optimistic that positive growth can come from this downturn. For example, he's particularly excited that his unit is part of a new project addressing strategic placement of breakaway terminal stanchions for emergency situations.

Sir Robert Habersham IV is honored to have been selected as Firefighter of the Month, and he is eager to consult with his teammates as to how to allocate the \$500 sponsorship from Marathon.



## **FIREFIGHTER OF THE MONTH JANUARY 2020**

### **APPARATUS OPERATOR JOSE RODRIGUEZ**

#### **STATION 12**

Apparatus Operator (“AO”) Jose Rodriguez is an 11-year veteran of the Los Angeles Fire Department. Recently promoted to AO, Rodriguez is still acclimating to his new role and the weight of his increased responsibilities.

What is an Apparatus Operator? AO’s drive the specialized heavy fire apparatus such as aerial ladder trucks, aircraft crash rapid intervention vehicles, hazardous materials squad vehicles, and heavy utility vehicles. AO’s are one of the LAFD’s frontline leadership roles. They often work under conditions involving serious risks to personal safety, where situational awareness, job knowledge, and physical fitness are essential to minimizing danger.

Behind the scenes, AO’s also play an integral role in overseeing the use and maintenance of countless tools and life-saving equipment. From chainsaws and generators to the "Jaws-of-Life", AO’s have their hands full keeping their crews safe and ready to respond.

With such an important workload, it’s amazing Rodriguez finds time for his LAFD passion project – serving as a Cadet Post Advisor. In this completely voluntary role, Rodriguez acts as a mentor, counselor and role model to young men and women interested in pursuing a career in the fire service.

In addition to their daily work responsibilities, Advisors like Rodriguez sacrifice time in their off hours to share their experience and insight with the next generation of firefighters.

Rodriguez imparts his wisdom by using real life experiences as teachable moments, even if those lessons come at his own expense. He shares first-hand accounts of harrowing situations to underscore the importance of attention to detail, and most importantly, teamwork.

When asked about his proudest achievements, Rodriguez humbly states that seeing the young men he mentored as cadets move into fulfilling careers as first responders. In fact, more than 15 cadets he’s mentored since 2010/2011, have become sworn members of the LAFD.

“It’s an incredible feeling when you’re able to meet these kids with just a spark of interest in becoming a firefighter,” shared Rodriguez. “Little by little, you get to know them, help them grow their skills, confidence, and passion. Then the next thing you know, years have flown by, and you bump into these kids - and by now they’re young adults - and they’re working alongside you helping to save lives. There’s just no better feeling.”

AO Rodriguez grew up in, and continues to reside in, the San Fernando Valley. When he isn’t spending time with his family, he’s with his Station 12 crew mates serving the eclectic neighborhoods of Highland Park, in North East Los Angeles.

The doors at 12’s are always open. If you’re in the area, AO Rodriguez invites you to stop by to say hello.