

Blazing New Trails

Deena Lee achieves a first for South Bay female firefighters.

Written by **Nancy Sokoler Steiner** | Photographed by **Michael Neveux**

As a single mother and waitress in the '90s, Deena Lee never imagined she'd one day become the South Bay's first female fire battalion chief. She took a CPR class to learn basic safety and discovered a passion. Lee then got certified as an emergency medical technician and began taking nursing classes at Long Beach City College. Working nights in a local ER, she received encouragement from firefighters to consider fire service.

"That had never occurred to me," says Lee, who began riding along on calls. "I fell in love. I had found my calling." After completing training and testing, she was hired by the El Segundo Fire Department in 2003 and promoted to fire captain in 2007.

Lee had been working as a professional firefighter for 15 years when she saw something unusual. Attending a Los Angeles County Fire Department summit with participants from throughout Southern California, she noticed a sprinkling of women wearing the black uniform signifying a battalion chief. A supervisory role, battalion chief ranks directly below fire chief—the top official of a community fire department.

"I thought, 'Oh my gosh! I can do this!'" says Lee. She took the promotional test and ranked highest among the candidates taking the test. In May 2019 she was appointed battalion chief—the first woman in the South Bay to attain that rank.

Now Lee wants other girls and women to learn about and receive mentoring for positions in fire service. She helped form the Women's Fire Alliance, a nonprofit organization supporting and empowering women in the field. With more than 100 members, the organization currently mentors 40+ women, including the high school student Lee guides.

According to the organization Women in Fire, the first female career firefighter was hired in 1974. In 2018 only 4% of professional firefighters were female, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

Lee acknowledges the difficulty of being female in a male-dominated field. "All eyes are on you when you're a woman going through the fire academy. You have to be

better because you can't blend in. As you work, you have to remember it's about service to the community and not get caught up with egos and testosterone."

She participates in community activities such as reading to children at the El Segundo Public Library and teaching first aid to Scouts, as well as teaching occasionally at the El Camino Fire Academy. She wants children and adults—females and males—to see a woman working in her role.

As one of three El Segundo battalion chiefs, Lee supervises the company—including firefighters, paramedics, the engineer and fire captains—on duty at that time. A typical day, which starts before 7 a.m., includes briefing company officers, engaging in physical and logistical training, handling administrative issues, attending meetings and responding to emergency calls.

Her message to women currently considering fire service: "You can do anything you put your mind to. Don't be discouraged when things are hard. It's totally worth it!" •

Deena Lee is the South Bay's first female battalion chief. She works closely with members of her company at the El Segundo Fire Dept. From left: Edan Douek, Deena Lee, Don Dennis and Chase Long.





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