

BC Shelly Nickelson Pt. 1

00:00:03 **Kate Fogle**

Today I am talking with retired Battalion Chief Shelly Nickelson via Zoom. It's Wednesday, October 2nd, 2024. Ms. Nickelson, can you please state your name and spell out your last name for us?

00:00:21 **Shelly Nickelson**

Shelly Nickelson. N i c k e l s o n.

00:00:26 **Kate Fogle**

Thank you. And I'm Kate Fogle. I'm the photo and film archivist for the DC Fire and EMS Foundation. That's Kate Fogle. F o g l e. To begin, starting at the beginning, how and why did you join the DC Fire Department?

00:00:50 **Shelly Nickelson**

Initially, I wanted to be a paramedic. I had a cousin who was a lieutenant on the job who encouraged me to apply for firefighter since they were looking to hire. They were giving a test, and he had encouraged myself and my brother to apply. He said there was a shortage of women on the job and it would be a good opportunity, and if I wanted to get training as a paramedic, that they would train me as an EMT and I could go to school to be a paramedic. So that's what I did. I went and took the test and I did pretty well. I had put in an application for paramedic, but I never heard anything back. While I was waiting for the application, I decided to go through with the training for the DC Firefighter, and that's where my career began.

00:01:47 **Kate Fogle**

That's amazing. So then in terms of your career, obviously you were able to retire as a Battalion Chief. Can you briefly trace your career as you advanced through the ranks?

00:02:03 **Shelly Nickelson**

Yes. I was a rookie, as they called me, at Engine 31, which was a slow company up in Northwest. It was pretty slow there. I then transferred to my—Chief asked me if I wanted to transfer to another company in the Fifth Battalion, which was Engine 21, which was a little busier. I did, and I went to Engine 21, and then I got promoted to Wagon Driver. While I was there, I was the only person to actually pass the test for Wagon Driver. I started out as a Wagon Driver there. Then a couple years later, they opened up a test for Squad Driver, which was back at Engine 31, because no one could pass the test there in that particular house.

00:02:59 **Kate Fogle**

Wow.

00:02:59 **Shelly Nickelson**

Someone challenged me to take the test at Rescue Squad 4, and he made a bet with me that I couldn't pass the test. I took him up on a challenge. And I was the only one to pass the test at Rescue Squad 4. I took that position. Once Rescue Squad 4 closed, they sent me to Truck Four, I mean, Truck 12. I wasn't happy there. It was kind of slow, and I had gotten used to being a little busy. I was talking to different people, and they encouraged me to apply for the Hazmat Unit. They said it was a good experience, so I did. I ended up going to the Hazmat Unit, and I spent some years there before I got promoted to sergeant. When I was promoted to sergeant, I was in the First Battalion and I stayed there for a little bit. Then I ended up transferring to the Third Battalion. I had the Third Battalion Chief, called me and asked me if I would be his aide, which was Tommy Johnson at the time. We had a good rapport because he had worked on a Hazmat Unit also. He asked me if I would be his aide, and I agreed, so I transferred to the Third Battalion. At the Third Battalion, I was a sergeant. Once I took the test for lieutenant, I passed the test for lieutenant. But before that, they sent me to the Training Academy to be an instructor for Hazmat. I did that for a little while. Before I left the Training Academy, I got a call from the Fire Chief telling me that I was going to be promoted to lieutenant and where would I like to go? I was kind of shocked that he called me. I had never really had any conversation with the Chief before. It was a

call that was kind of out of the blue for me. He had heard good things about me and I had done good things and wanted to know if I had someplace in mind I would like to go as a lieutenant. I asked him to give me a little time to think about it. When I got back to him, I told him I would like to go to Rescue Squad 3. He was kind of shocked because the Rescue Squad was mostly, well, it was all men. It was hard to get on the Unit, and there were plenty of guys waiting to get on the Squad. Whether you were a lieutenant or sergeant or just a regular firefighter, it didn't matter. But I had all the training because I was the Squad Driver at Squad Four, and I was a Hazmat Technician, so I had all the training that was required to be on the Rescue Squad. I told him, Rescue Squad 3. When I went to Rescue Squad 3 as a lieutenant, I got a lot of phone calls, good and bad, about being there. But I took it all in stride because I had my chest poked out, I was there.

00:06:35 **Kate Fogle**

Absolutely.

00:06:36 **Shelly Nickelson**

But I didn't care. I didn't let it faze me. I had people who encouraged me, so that was good. Then I moved on from Rescue Squad 3, when I got promoted as captain. They sent me to Recruiting, and I did a couple of years at Recruiting. Then when I got a phone call from the Chief that I was going to be promoted to Battalion Chief, and asked me to go to Fire Prevention, I was a little taken back because I was hoping to go to the Firefighting Division. I knew nothing about Fire Prevention. I was kind of hesitant. They encouraged me to go and try it out. There were a lot of women there, and they wanted me to go and interact with the women there. I accepted. I went to Fire Prevention, and I was there a short time because my husband got sick. I asked to be put on shift work so that I could help with my husband's recovery. They sent me to the Sixth Battalion, and I was in the Sixth Battalion for a year before I ended up retiring from the job. That's my career. That's my journey.

00:08:08 **Kate Fogle**

That's amazing. I have to ask, it sounds like you were obviously keeping your head up. You were aware that there were these opportunities opening up. Did you ever expect that you would become a Battalion Chief? Like when you got going here, did you actually see that as—

00:08:33 **Shelly Nickelson**

Actually, when I was a rookie at Engine 31, my first couple of years there, I told people, I'm not going to last ten years on this job. I was like, this is a tough job, I'm not going to last ten years, it's going to beat me up, but I did.

00:08:51 **Kate Fogle**

You did it. I have to ask you, too, can you visualize when that point was, when you realized, you know what, I'm actually going to be sticking around. Where was that in this whole process that it went from, yeah, this job is going to, as you said, it's going to beat me up to, when did that shift to, wow, yeah, this is really something I'm enjoying? There's hardships, of course, but I'm going to see this through. Can you pinpoint that a little bit?

00:09:28 **Shelly Nickelson**

I think that happened basically when I started moving around to the different companies, and I got to experience the different positions that I was in. I think if I had to stay at Engine 31 or even 21, even though they were great experiences, I had great people around me, it was more of me getting out and experiencing different things instead of being locked in on one location, one position. I really enjoyed just getting out and moving around, from being a firefighter, to being a technician. The different technicians, it was Wagon Driver, the Squad Driver, the Hazmat Technician, all of that. There is light at the end of the tunnel because I really did get to experience different things. And I enjoyed that part, I really did.

00:10:39 **Kate Fogle**

Wow.

00:10:39 **Shelly Nickelson**

So that helped me along with my career, staying focused and saying, I can do this. I can do this.

00:10:50**Kate Fogle**

Wow. Any career for probably most people is going to involve colleagues and the support that they provide us. Can you speak a little bit about specific colleagues that served as mentors or supported you throughout your time in service? I know you had mentioned George Belle in a previous interview. Can you speak more about his guidance as well?

00:11:21**Shelly Nickelson**

Let me just start with at the Training Academy.

00:11:25**Kate Fogle**

Okay.

00:11:27**Shelly Nickelson**

Donna Gray. She was an instructor at the Training Academy, and she was a good source of encouragement and helping us to make it through the Training Academy because it wasn't easy. To enlighten us of what we were experiencing out in the field. So she motivated me personally, along with Lieutenant Proctor. He's the one that encouraged me to take the Fire Department exam to begin with. He was a good source also. Once I got to Firefighting, Engine 31, where I was a rookie, I was George Belle's rookie. Because he came in before me. He took me under his wing and helped train me. He was really straightforward. He didn't try to color it. He told me different things. Told me how some people are going to do everything they can to hold me back. That I shouldn't be there. One thing that always stuck with me, he said, if you have to cry, never let them see you cry. Go off to yourself and cry. He said, but if they know they got to you, they're going to keep on getting to you. So he said, never let it show that they have gotten to you. That's something that always stuck with me because there was times where I was like, I don't know if I can do this. Just the frustration and the build up and the disrespect at different times. He said, just always hold your head up and just look them in the eye and let them know, even though you might want to say something or do something, just try to not let it show. That's something that stuck with me throughout my career. I think it really helped me. I tried to deal with it in my own way. I would talk to different ones. He was someone that actually, to this day, we're best of friends.

00:14:03**Kate Fogle**

Oh, my gosh.

00:14:04**Shelly Nickelson**

Our kids grew up together. His wife and all of us, we traveled together. So we remained best friends throughout my career and till today. He was a real big role model for me. Bea Rudder. She was someone that encouraged me. Someone that I used to pick up the phone, called her up after a hard day of work, and I said, how much does a standpipe rack weigh? She bust out laughing and she said, all I can tell you is, it weighs more on the tenth floor than it does on the first floor. We used to laugh and joke, and I would call her and ask her, how did you deal with this? What did you do about this? And she would tell me in her own way—

00:15:00**Kate Fogle**

Yeah.

00:15:01**Shelly Nickelson**

—what she did, what she experienced. That was someone that really I could talk to also. And still today, we're friends. She'll call me or I call her. Every blue moon, we'll get together and have dinner. She's another person that I keep in contact with. Tommy Johnson, he was my Battalion Chief. He was the one that encouraged me to come to the Third Battalion, to be his aide. Thomas Herlihy. He was my first Battalion Chief in the First Battalion. I was a fill in aide. He would always ask me in the morning when I would come in. He never called

me by my first name. It was always Firefighter Nickelson. Other people, once they get to know you, they address you by your first name. But it was always professional. Firefighter Nickelson, what is blah, blah, blah, blah? He'll ask me a question. How do you do such and such? I was the wake up call of the morning. You had to answer these questions first thing in the morning. He'll shake his head and, okay. Then he'll walk on off. Do whatever he does. If I didn't know the answer, I would tell him, I don't know. He was like, well, okay, well, that's something you need to find out. Get back with me when you find out. I looked at that as, he was encouraging me to do better and to know more. He always said, there's nothing wrong with knowing your job better than you think you know it. He was an encouragement also. Lieutenant James Martin at the Hazmat Unit taught me a lot. He was a one of a kind as far as talking to you, because he was someone that was really good at explaining things and he was a good role model for me. Of course, I had different firefighters throughout the department that I could call on and just chat with and different ones that would call me. If they saw me on the fireground and I had different rapports with different guys that would call me up and say, hey, you know, such and such or, you know, this, that and the other. Did you see this or did you remember to do this? Different things like that. I had one lieutenant who called me up and said, hey, Nickelson, you did a great job. But you forgot to do such and such. I was like, oh, wow, thank you, thank you. Little things like that goes a long way. There was a lot of firefighters that I really appreciate the phone call from that encouraged me and told me when I did good and that they respected me for being one of the stronger firefighters, as they put it, on the job.

00:18:50Kate Fogle

That's wonderful. Wow, that was fantastic. I have to ask you, you're talking about Donna Gray being one of your instructors. Within your class, how many other women were there beside yourself?

00:19:08Shelly Nickelson

If I remember correctly, there was like, 6 or 7 of us.

00:19:14Kate Fogle

Wow. Okay.

00:19:15Shelly Nickelson

6 or 7. They ended up dividing our class into two classes because we were so big. But we all trained together as one unit.

00:19:28Kate Fogle

Right. Okay.

00:19:29Shelly Nickelson

I think it was like 6 or 7 of us.

00:19:33Kate Fogle

Did everyone make it through, to your knowledge?

00:19:39Shelly Nickelson

One young lady broke her ankle and was recycled, but she did make it through. Another lady found out that she was expecting, so she got recycled. But she did make it through. Another lady, I think she didn't. She made it through the Academy, but she didn't make it through her probation. She ended up quitting. She said the job wasn't for her. Then in my class, which was, goodness, I think it was 292.

00:20:20Kate Fogle

Wow.

00:20:21Shelly Nickelson

It was only two of us that actually finished in my class—I think it was three that was actually my class. I think it was three in the other class, and maybe six of us. We both made it through. And the other lady, like I said, when she joined the Department, when she made it through the Academy, she didn't pursue her career. She ended up quitting. But we all made it through the Academy eventually.

00:20:59 Kate Fogle

Sure, sure. That's really interesting perspective on just some of the challenges, obviously. You were saying that one of the women found out she was expecting, just things that can happen when you're a woman trying to pursue a career, in any field really. That's really interesting. That kind of leads into this next question of, you mentioned Bea Rudder, which is wonderful. She's obviously the one that kicked off the integration of women into DCFD in 1978. She certainly persevered through her own misogynistic treatment by some of her colleagues. Can you talk about your own experiences as a woman in DCFD, both at the start of your career in 1986, correct, as well as when you retired from the Department in 2011?

00:22:03 Shelly Nickelson

The start of my career, when I started out at Engine 31, I didn't really know anything about firehouse behavior. Or, didn't really know what to expect on my first day. All I know was where I was assigned. I had checked out and rode past the firehouse and went in to see where I was going to be assigned before my first day. But other than that, I didn't know anything really about firehouse behavior or I should say very little other than what they told us at the Training Academy. My first day on the job, I walked in the firehouse, I get there. I was supposed to be there at 7:00 AM. I actually got there around 6:00 AM, and I was like, wow, I'm an hour early. Let me go and get something to eat. I went and got a sandwich and came back. I get there at 6:30 AM. When I walk in, one of the gentlemen on Rescue Squad 4. I shouldn't say one, it was a couple of them. They were sitting in the sitting room, and I walk in and I sign in the journal reporting for duty, and I asked for the officer in charge. Before I could even introduce myself, of course, they knew I was coming. They were expecting me, but I didn't know that at the time. They start yelling, hey, you rookie, you piece of trash, you get here at 6:30 AM. Just different negative things that took me by surprise. I was like, whoa, what? I'm like, I'm not late. They're like, you're a piece of trash. You get here at 6:30 AM, people are waiting to go home. Don't you ever get here this late again? Just different things they were saying. I was scared to death, and my feelings were hurt. Just then, the Sergeant, he comes up and introduces himself and he takes me in the office and I'm standing there, I have water in my eyes. I'm like, oh my goodness, what did I do wrong? I don't know these people. He said, look, don't pay them any mind. They're just acting up. He talked to me and calmed me down and got me to where I could regroup. He told me what to do and good time to report for work. He said, I know I wasn't late, but people get there at least an hour early to relieve their fellow members, just to be courteous. He explained things to me, what to expect and what to do and kind of ease the tension. That was my first day and—

00:25:35 Kate Fogle

Oh my gosh!

00:25:36 Shelly Nickelson

—he told me that the person that I was going to be working with was George Belle, but he wasn't there. He was on leave that day, and he told me that he would be in the following tour. But to just follow his lead. Everything was going to be okay. He introduced me to the Wagon Driver, who took me under his wing and took me aside and talked to me and made me feel better.

00:26:05 Kate Fogle

Yeah.

00:26:05 Shelly Nickelson

That was my first negative experience.

00:26:08 Kate Fogle

Oh my gosh.

00:26:10 **Shelly Nickelson**

Really negative experience. Another negative experience was when I was still a rookie, we had a fire. And after the fire, we were cleaning up. And this aide—he was an aide for the Fourth Battalion Chief—he comes up to where we were standing around and he just starts badmouthing women. Women don't have no business on this job. They ain't worth this. And just, belittling women left and right. And I'm standing there like, does he not see me? Does he not know I'm a woman? The members that I was with, they said, come on, Shelly, we don't have to listen to this. They said, he's an idiot. We kind of just walked off. But I was like, what is up with this guy?

00:27:11 **Kate Fogle**

Wow.

00:27:13 **Shelly Nickelson**

Years later down the road, he became a Battalion Chief. I never called him out by name, but I called him out by his position in front of some other members about earlier in my career, how he had disrespected me and disrespected women on the job. I could see he knew who I was talking about. I just made it very uncomfortable for him. No one else that I know of knew who I was referring to because we were with a bunch of Chiefs. I was with a bunch of different Chiefs at the time. He knew who I was referring to. I was like, yeah, this is my way of getting back at you.

00:28:01 **Kate Fogle**

Absolutely. I mean.

00:28:04 **Shelly Nickelson**

Also, there was a time when I was at Engine 21. I had a sergeant and he was harassing me. He kept making sexual advances towards me, and I kept telling him, I wasn't interested and to leave me alone. I had mentioned it to my buddy George, and he was like, say something to him. I said, I have. I kept telling him to leave me alone. I came home one evening and I was talking to my husband, and I was telling him and he was like, do you want me to go up there and talk to him? I said, no, no, let me handle it. I ended up going to work the next day, and he was in his office, and I walked in and I closed the door, and I said, Sarge, can I speak with you? And he said, oh, yeah, real smooth. I said, you have two choices here. I said, either you can stop harassing me or I'm going to file sexual harassment charges on you. I said, either you want to keep your job or you don't. We can make this easy, or you can make it hard. It's on you, I said, but I do not appreciate you making sexual advances on me. I keep telling you I don't like it. You disrespected me. I said, so I'm going to push this further if you do not stop. His eyes kind of got big and he said, you know, I apologize. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I didn't know I had disrespected you. I said, yes, you did, because I keep telling you to stop harassing me, and you just keep on. He said, well, it won't happen again. It won't happen again. And he was an older gentleman. He was in retirement age. I said, I know you don't want to retire, for them to force you out, because of me pursuing charges against you. He was like, no. He said, well, I'm glad you came to talk to me, one on one. He said, we won't let this go any further. I said, well, that's up to you, whether it goes any further. He said, no, no, it stops right here, right now. After that, I didn't have any more problems with him. He did apologize. Eventually. I mean, after that day, like I said, it was smooth sailing. We got along fine. I was glad that I did talk to him first before pressing charges against him. We were able to work it out. I didn't want to be labeled one of those women who just hollers, I'm being harassed, because I heard that so much on the Department. Oh, just because somebody says something, she's going to file sexual harassment. You heard that a lot on the job about different women. I didn't want to be labeled that, unless I had to be labeled that, because of an incident. I'm glad I took the route of speaking with him and getting it clear with him that this was not going to be accepted. And it ended there. That was when I was a firefighter still at Engine 21, when that happened. Throughout my career, I've always heard different guys say women shouldn't be on the job. When I was a sergeant, I had a captain who—I had made a statement about the men using the women's bathroom—and he thought it was kind of funny. Well, before women came, men used that bathroom. Well, I don't appreciate it now that women are here, that you still allow them to use the bathroom. His thing was, well, I don't think women should be on the job.

00:32:33 **Kate Fogle**

Wow.

00:32:35 **Shelly Nickelson**

I said, well, what would you say if your daughter wanted to be on the job? Because I knew he had a daughter, and he said, I wouldn't allow her. I said, well, how could you stop her? He said, because she would respect me and she would not take a career that I didn't want her to take. I said, you say that now because they're young. You can't control it when she gets older. She has her own mind. He said, oh yeah, my children will never disrespect me. If I told my daughter I didn't want her to be a firefighter, she won't be a firefighter. We had a rocky relationship—

00:33:12 **Kate Fogle**

Yeah.

00:33:13 **Shelly Nickelson**

—on the job. When I was a sergeant, I was assigned to his house. We didn't see eye to eye. We didn't really say anything to each other unless we absolutely had to. He would relieve me in the morning, and we would speak, and I would pass on goings on throughout the day. Other than that, we didn't really have much to say. I was on the fireground with him once, and my company made a rescue. We rescued three children, and he was the Chief at the time. When it went up the chain of command, I got a phone call from one of the Chiefs saying, Sergeant Nickelson, your report sounds great, but your captain—who was the acting Chief at the time—doesn't have good things to say about you or about the event, but I'm going to send in a letter of commendation anyway because I know you, and I don't know why you and this particular Chief's reports aren't the same. I was kind of surprised, but he said, I think you deserve this award. If it wasn't for what your Captain said—or Acting Chief at the time—he said, you should have gotten a medal. But he said, I had to take everything into consideration. I said, well, I did it because it was something that had to be done. I didn't rescue those kids for recognition. It's my job. I said, I've never been about trying to gain recognition. Whether I get a medal or not, it's no big deal to me. I said, I know what I did and what happened. I said, this Captain and I, we never seen eye to eye, but it is what it is. I end up getting a letter of commendation and that was okay with me. But, after my Chief got a hold of the information, he called me up, and he was like, Nickelson, you deserve that medal. I'm going to write up my report even though I wasn't there. I'm going to put in my report, you deserve that medal. This other Chief, I don't know what he has against you, but you deserve that medal. I'm going to put in my review that you should get it. I guess he did, but nothing ever came of it. He was pretty upset that it didn't go further and that I didn't get a medal, or that my members and I didn't get a medal, I should say, for the rescue that we made. But that's okay. I'm okay with it. He pretty much called my Captain up and gave him a piece of his mind to let him know that what he did wasn't right. That was an experience. That was an experience. What else? I don't know, I think...

00:37:17 **Kate Fogle**

A question for you also, do you feel like the tide started kind of changing as the years went on? Like because you were advancing in the ranks. Do you know what I mean? Was there a little bit more respect, like you've been around, it's probably easier to maybe behave this way toward, say, like a rookie than it is to someone that's advancing in the ranks. But also, do you think time started to kind of shift people's understanding that this is just not appropriate behavior? I want to hope that that was part of it, too. I guess what I'm asking, Shelly, is by the time you're leaving in 2011, had some of that stuff seemed to have kind of gone away, or was there still kind of this ingrained systemic misogyny around you?

00:38:17 **Shelly Nickelson**

I must say, yes, some of it was still there, come 2011. Nowhere near as bad as it was. But, even when I was a Battalion Chief, you got treated different. They still looked at me as like... Those who knew me, who really knew me, knew I was about my job, took me seriously. Some who heard of me, I've had different ones come up and say, oh, you're Nickelson. And I'd be like, what does that mean? Is that good? Is that bad? What? Oh, you're one of the better women on the job. I hear you do your job. I kind of look at them. To me, that was just a stupid statement, because I would say, I can tell you about plenty of men in this job that don't do their job, and I don't go up to them and say, oh, you're such and such, you do your job, you know what I mean? That always took me by surprise because I'd have to a lot—people would say—I had gotten a reputation of being a go-getter, being,

some people would say, she's one of the guys. And I was saying, no, I'm not one of the guys. I'm just me. I'm just doing my job. I don't try to be one of the guys. I just try to do what I need to do, to the best of my ability. I try to get along with everybody, but I'm not out here trying to impress anyone. To me, that made it simpler. I didn't want to take sides with being called one of the guys and then being looked at by the women as, oh, you know, she thinks she's better than us. I don't know if you can understand that, but it was kind of that sort of thing. Now, I did have women that would call me and ask me different things. Some of the women, I had a good rapport with. Some women, I hardly even knew. There was some women that didn't care for me. I did speak my mind if they asked me a question, I told them what I thought. There was different women that I would call and say, hey, you need to watch yourself because you're doing this, this and this, and being on this job, being a woman on this job, it's only going to make it harder for you. For example, there was a sergeant. Her and I talked different times, but it was a sergeant that had a reputation as a firefighter, as being lazy. Now, whether she was or not, I don't know. But that was her so-called reputation among some of the men. When she became sergeant, her and I, we would communicate. I had gotten wind of that they were going to try to set her up so that she would be put on charges. I warned her because they said that whenever it was her time to stand watch at the watch desk, she would be upstairs. I warned her. I said, look, I don't know what's going on over there, but it's just a rumor that's going around. Be aware, they're trying to set you up. She was like, okay, well, all right, I'm not really worried about it, but okay. Lo and behold, they did, and she got in trouble. It's just kind of weird how you think that you're trying to reach out to help someone and they think that they have it or they think that, okay, she thought that she didn't have a problem with the guys there. I told her, look, you have to watch your back because even though they might tell you one thing, you have to do your job and make sure you do it the way you're supposed to do it, because you know, they'll smile in your face and stab you right in the back. I was aware of that. I tell you, all of that came back to my buddy, George Belle. He told me that in the beginning, he said, you got to do your job, don't be listening to these fools out here tell you anything and everything. As long as you know your job and what you're supposed to do and where you're supposed to be, you'll be okay. He said, but they will try to set you up, and you got to be mindful of that and always remember that. It did help me along. Even up until when I, like I said, I became Battalion Chief. There were times where, I had different Chiefs who I would call and talk to. Some I knew were giving me a bunch of nonsense. It was almost like I was quizzing some of them because I knew the answer, but I wanted to see what they would tell me to see if I could trust them to be honest with me. Because I'm in a new position, and I'm trying to figure this thing out, too, and I knew some of the gentlemen that I could trust and some of them that I didn't really know. I would call and ask, hey, what about this? How do you handle this or different things? Like I said, a couple of them, they would give me a bunch of nonsense. I would say to myself, why are you doing this? But I learned from that. You learn who you can confide in, who you can go to and who you can trust, and who you couldn't. Even up until 2011, like you said, there were still guys on the job who did not want women on the job or didn't think they could do the job and shouldn't be there and definitely shouldn't be there in a Chief's position.

00:45:47 **Kate Fogle**

Wow.

00:45:53 **Shelly Nickelson**

I was the second Battalion Chief ever in the Department. For me to make it that high, of course, someone thought I slept my way to the top. Some of them thought I earned it. There was others who didn't know how to feel about it. I never got caught up. I got married when I was in my probation, so I never got caught up with, as far as anyone could say, that I had a relationship on the job, even though there was plenty of rumors. Plenty of rumors. I just laughed about it because I knew they weren't true, but no one ever confronted me on anything. But it was always there. Oh, she must have did this, or she must have did that. Even when I was the only woman to pass—not even the only woman—but the only person, firefighter to pass the Wagon Driver test at Engine 21 and the Squad Driver test at Squad 4. They couldn't believe it. How did she do it? What, did she sleep with the officer? I mean, these type of things. I just thought it was kind of funny, and I just went on about my business. That was basically how I would handle it. I always just made sure that I could do my job and that was my proof, that I'm here and I'm worthy of this position.

00:47:57 **Kate Fogle**

You mentioned that you were married early into your career, and that kind of shifts into this next question. I know that I had heard you speak a little bit in a different interview about the Union's support when you were pursuing access to refrigeration for breast milk, which obviously is an important accommodation for pumping mothers. Did you find that the Union in all of that was your best ally for affecting the necessary changes like

that? Like getting this separate refrigeration? Go ahead please.

00:48:42**Shelly Nickelson**

Absolutely, absolutely. As a matter of fact, Tomi Rucker, was big in the Union with working with trying to get accommodations and different things for women changed. Her and I worked closely together implementing a lot of the changes for the women. We pushed for uniforms, not so much clothing, but turnout gear. Gloves. Just trying to get gloves to fit women's hands. We had to wear men's gloves. They were always too big. We had to fight to have gloves to fit to do our job better. We had to fight to have our own restroom, to have privacy. To stop men from using our restrooms. That was a big push. The Union, with Lieutenant Sneed, when he was a Union President, he was behind us 100%. Now, before this, when President Tippett was a Union President, and I went to him and I complained. I went to one of the Union meetings and complained because at the Union meeting, there was nothing but guys, I think it was maybe three women there, and maybe a room full of 50 men. They asked for question and answer time, and I asked about trying to get accommodations for women at the firehouses. And he blew me off. He said, you all took a man's job. This was a man's job. The firehouses are all old. You have to make do with what we have. Basically, saying, he wasn't worried about it. It is what it is. No changes ever came until President Sneed became Union President. Like I said, I started working with him and Tomi Rucker, and we pursued changes and we fought for the changes in the bathroom, the changes in the turnout gear, the changes with accommodating women when they do come back to firefighting, and they're breastfeeding. I was one of those women when I had my children, I was breastfeeding, and I had to come back to work. I only had a little amount of leave. When I came back to work, I was still breastfeeding, but I didn't have—I had to store my milk in a regular refrigerator. I was always worried about someone tampering with it. Different times, they would move my bottle that I would put the milk in, being funny, what they thought was funny. Moving it around or pouring it out, until I had a word with my officer, who put an end to it. At times, it was like you were working with a bunch of kids who thought everything was a joke and didn't take it seriously. But the Union was a big, big help in helping to push these things through and helping us to get through to the Fire Chief and different members on the job that these changes, it's about time for these changes to take place. We put in policies that was implemented and put into the books that these things would not be tolerated. The new guidelines that we are to follow. We got refrigerators where, if a woman was breastfeeding, that she had a lock to her own refrigerator to store the breast milk. That was something that we were proud of. Along with the the restrooms. Lieutenant Sneed and Tomi Rucker, they played a big part in doing that. And if it wasn't for them, I don't know how many years down the road the changes would have taken place after that.

00:54:10**Kate Fogle**

I'm just so thankful for you breaking that down a bit more. It wasn't obviously just the storage for breast milk. It seems like a no brainer, but I can't imagine trying to wear gloves that are not sized properly. That's just crazy. So was the Union kind of the only avenue then, or did you find, was it possible to talk to colleagues in terms of maybe changing some perspectives that way too, or was the best way forward through the policy changes?

00:54:53**Shelly Nickelson**

Once I got involved with pursuing the avenue with the Union, and I knew Ray Sneed—Lieutenant Sneed—was backing us. We went to the Fire Chief, who was, Chief Thompson and Chief Rubin. Both were instrumental in seeing changes come about.

00:55:27**Kate Fogle**

Wow. Okay.

00:56:21**Shelly Nickelson**

They made me the women's program manager and made it aware to the Department that any issues with women were to go through me, and I was to bring it to their attention directly. Once word got out to the Department that a woman could call and tell me that something wasn't right, or an officer that was having problems with a woman would call me and say, something needs to be done or needed to be addressed. I would take it to the Fire Chief. Things slowly got better. There were less reports coming up the chain of command, as far as charges being brought against women and women putting in charges against men. Because they would call me up and say, hey, Shelly, can you come over here and address this? Can you talk to this young lady here? Or, this young lady is having a problem, would you mind coming over talking to her? My days off, I would go and I would

address these concerns. Or if I was working, I would take the company, we would go over to that particular firehouse and I would talk to that individual. Different times, there were situations that I couldn't address. I would take them to the Fire Chief and we would discuss it, and we would come up with a solution, and take it back to the company and say, this is how we're going to handle it. Once they knew I had the ear of the Fire Chief, I got a lot more respect, as far as women's concerns in the Department. They knew that the Department was beginning to take these concerns and problems very seriously, because it only took a couple of times for word to get around that this particular firefighter or this particular officer is being put on charges. Or this particular female has been addressed. It didn't take a whole lot for word to get around and to know that they're serious. The Department is now taking this serious. We need to make sure that we do what we need to do to protect ourselves. And we don't get put on charges. That's what we did at the Union. The Union was a big help in pushing that to get it put out there that someone is there to address the concerns of the women on the Department. Like I said, Chief Thompson and Chief Rubin was a big part of that, in getting that out there and working with us to let them know that harassment or anything else wasn't going to be tolerated and put all the new guidelines out on what to do.

01:00:04**Kate Fogle**

I think this might be a good segue because right there you're talking about, once you have the support within the Union, and then you've got, like you said, the ear of Fire Chiefs that are willing to take this stuff seriously, you're seeing some changes, right? My question would be, from where you are, what is your assessment of how far you know the Department has come, but also, knowing that you are still experiencing some of these issues, even as a Battalion Chief right at retirement, in what ways do you think it could or should improve the Department for women?

01:00:52**Shelly Nickelson**

The Department from when I first started out until the day that I retired, it was a big improvement. A big, big improvement. I think even today, going back and just talking to some of the women about things today. Even today, I still get phone calls from different women who say, hey, Chief, how would you deal with such and such? Oh, I got a problem with this. But just talking to the different women today, there is so much more going on to encourage women to join the Department, to be promoted to officer. They're doing so much to encourage women to seek the career as firefighters, which is a wonderful career. I would encourage anyone that has a little bit of concern about the Department to just go for it. It's really a good job. I think with any job, really, there's always someone out there that's looking to try themselves or see what they can get away with. That's the Department. It's always been a male-dominated field. It's always going to be those who think that women shouldn't be there, that they can't do the job. I've told men before, there are plenty of men on this job that shouldn't be here, that can't do the job. Because we are smaller in numbers, don't pick on us. I think they're doing a really good job with encouraging women to be firefighters. They're really doing everything— put out guidelines and different rules to make sure that you know where you stand as far as harassment, what your options are, they make that known. They have women that, once you come on the Department, when you're in the Training Academy, they have women that come down there and talk to you to let you know how to address things and what to do if you do run into a problem. So I think it's really come a long way. I don't think you'll ever—I shouldn't say ever—but it's hard to believe that you will ever change the mindset that the job is an equal opportunity job for all. Because there will always be that male-dominant figure that thinks it takes away their masculinity because women can do the job just like they can. Granted, we might not be as strong as they are in some aspects, but there are different ways of doing the same thing, and we get it done. And that's what it all boils down to.

01:04:40**Kate Fogle**

That's a great, great assessment of that. I know you mentioned this rescue of the children previously in our conversation. I wanted to ask you, and I don't know if maybe that's just one of many events for you, but I was hoping that you could speak to some of the milestones of your career.

01:05:07**Shelly Nickelson**

Some of the milestones. Let's see. Well, just getting promoted was a milestone.

01:05:17**Kate Fogle**

Absolutely.

01:05:20**Shelly Nickelson**

Getting promoted. Each time I got promoted was a milestone. I think that one of the biggest things in my early career, was when I got promoted to Rescue Squad 4. Like I said, I took the challenge, because the Squad didn't have any women at that time assigned to it. That was one of the jobs that the more elite firefighters get chosen for. When I got that position as Wagon Driver, Squad Driver, I should say, at Squad Four, and all of these rumors were going around about how could they let a woman take a man's position? Just blew my mind. Like I said, I was like a peacock walking around with my chest poked out because I did it. I passed the test, and no one expected me to be the only one to pass a test. That was a big thing for me. I was jumping for joy. Even though they couldn't see it, but I was. I was so proud of myself that I had done that. That was a big thing for me. Also, when I made Battalion Chief, I was proud of myself for getting selected, even though there were, I think, myself and one other young lady up for promotion. We were Captains at the time for that promotion and I got chosen. I was proud of myself that I got chosen for the position. I thought I deserved it. I took training and I took classes to get there. I worked in all the different divisions, just about. I was very proud of myself that I had become Battalion Chief. I was kind of disappointed that I wasn't going to Firefighting Division right off the bat, But, I was happy when I did get to Firefighting Division, because that's where I really wanted to be. Even though it was short lived, I enjoyed my time out in Firefighting as a Battalion Chief. I look at it as, those who thought that I couldn't do it, I did do it. I proved them wrong. I think those two things are two of my biggest accomplishments within the Department that I really look back on and say, you did that. You did that. I wore that Battalion Fire Chief shield with pride. And I didn't take it lightly at all.

01:09:13**Kate Fogle**

I guess this leads really well into the next question. How would you say that your career in DCFD continues to impact you today?

01:09:36**Shelly Nickelson**

Coming from where I was before I joined the Department and to where I am today, it has given me a lot more confidence in myself. I was kind of shy and quiet before I joined the Department. But it gave me the confidence to speak up and to be bold and to stand my ground. I think it made me a stronger person. Even today, when I see things or don't agree with something, I talk about it. It taught me how to not present myself in a way where I might offend someone or anger someone. I'm the type of person that if I see you doing something wrong now, I'll talk to you one on one. I'm not out to embarrass you or to make you feel bad. But I'm there to help you. I think I learned that, just coming up through the ranks on the Fire Department, on how to treat people and seeing how other people were being treated and addressed. Especially working with the women, it made me be more conscientious of how to present myself as a woman with the confidence of speaking with them and trying to help them and encourage them in their career and their decision making. Even today, when I talk to different people, people ask me about the Fire Department, even people who don't even know me. They say, oh, you were on the Fire Department, what did you think about it? How did you do it as a woman? There's still so many people so surprised. You don't look like a firefighter. Well, what does a firefighter look like?

01:12:10**Kate Fogle**

Right?

01:12:13**Shelly Nickelson**

That's the famous question. You don't look like a firefighter. What does a firefighter look like? Because I often say, they say, what did you used to do? And when I say I'm retired, well, what did you used to do? I have to giggle to myself because I know when I tell them, they're going to be surprised by my reaction. Like what? But like I said, the Department gave me a lot more confidence to stand up for myself and to believe in myself, believe that I can do it. That's what I encouraged my kids, growing up, don't let anyone tell you you can't do it. You do it for yourself. If it's something you want to do, then you pursue it. That's basically what I did. Like I said, a lot of that goes back to my friend George Belle. He encouraged me. There was times I called him up and I was like, I can't do this. He was like, BS, you can do this. Don't listen to those knuckleheads. He would encourage me. And he played a big role in my career. And then I'm very thankful for that. Very thankful.

01:13:48**Kate Fogle**

That seems like another really beautiful aspect of this is that, not only did you meet some incredible colleagues, but these have turned into lifelong friends for you.

01:14:00**Shelly Nickelson**

Yes, yes they have. Really has.

01:14:06**Kate Fogle**

That's amazing. Are there any other ways? You're talking about having confidence that's been really grown through this period of time of your life. Can you think of any other ways that the Department has shaped you just for who you are now going forward as a retiree? Like, are there certain things that really you go, that's the stuff coming now, from my period of time I spent as a firefighter. Or maybe you feel like you kind of covered all that.

01:14:54**Shelly Nickelson**

I don't know, I think I probably covered everything.

01:15:06**Kate Fogle**

Okay. That's great. I think what you said was really, really profound, honestly. So then we're really at just the last question. As mentioned, there's going to be people coming as virtual visitors to our website, that's trying to give a really nuanced telling of the history of the DC Fire Department. What would you want visitors of this website to know about the Department?

01:15:40**Shelly Nickelson**

Wow. I think I would want them to know that the Department has really grown over the years. That they have really tried to change the mindset of this being a male-dominated field. That they have encouraged women throughout to make it a career. They really tried to make it an equal opportunity job, even though it says equal opportunity. But they have really put forth the effort to see that it is that. Even with the present Fire Chief, I see how he is working hard to make everybody come together in the Department. How he encourages women to go out and support one another, not only within our Department, but with other departments. So I think that the Department has really turned around. It's just about done a complete 360, I believe. And trying to change the way they do things and handle things with the men on the Department, their mindset, and even the women. They think that, like I was at one time, didn't think that I would last ten years, like I said, but letting them know that this is a career, that you can do this. And helping them find ways to adjust. But the Fire Department, it's a good job. It's a great job, actually. I tell people all the time, if they're looking for a job, apply for the Fire Department. It's a great opportunity. It really is. You get to meet some wonderful people on the job and off the job, and you get that camaraderie, where people build friendships, working relationships on and off the job. As far as history goes, I think that, like I said, the Department has really done a good job in turning it around and making it a positive thing to look forward to. I guess when I came on, a lot of men didn't want women on, but now you even have men encouraging women to apply to the Fire Department. That's a big thing. That's a big thing.

01:19:35**Kate Fogle**

Absolutely. That's that's wonderful. I have to say, thank you so much for talking with me today. I think if you're okay, we'll end the interview here.

01:19:54**Shelly Nickelson**

Okay. Yes.

BC Shelly Nickelson Pt. 2

00:00:02 **Kate Fogle**

All right, go ahead, Shelly.

00:00:04 **Shelly Nickelson**

When I was on the job, even now, I don't use curse words or foul language. Whenever people were around me that were using it, I would ask them please be respectful and not curse around me. Some would respect it and some would just walk off and carry the conversation somewhere else. When I was in the firehouse, there was this Chief and Lieutenant that was sitting in the sitting room, and I was watching TV. They were having their own little conversation, but every other word was m_f_ [expletive]. Finally I said, excuse me, but could you all watch your mouth? I don't appreciate you all cursing around me like that. They both looked at me like I had three heads, and then the Chief said, okay, whatever you say. Shelly Nickelson, and him and the Lieutenant got up and left the room. A few days later, the Chief came to me and he said, you know what, Firefighter Nickelson? You got some big balls to talk to us like that. He said that took a lot of nerve to tell the Chief and Lieutenant to watch their mouths. But I respect you for that. I just burst out laughing, and I was like, well, I don't know about balls, Chief, but I appreciate that.

00:01:49 **Kate Fogle**

Oh my gosh.

00:01:51 **Shelly Nickelson**

Another incident that I had that just came to mind when you were speaking.