ROOKIE SEASON: 24 HOURS WITH LOS ANGELES FIRE DEPARTMENT

In 2015, Anh Nguyen (B.S., Kinesiology, 2012; M.S., Kinesiology, 2014) was one of the first two women hired by the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) after a hiring freeze that lasted from 2008 to 2013. In August 2016, she successfully completed her probationary year and received the official firefighter’s shield on her helmet. Join her in a typical 24-hour day as a rookie at Station 58, just south of Beverly Hills and West Hollywood.

5:45 A.M. SHIFT CHANGE
Nguyen arrives on time. The firefighter she’s relieving has been there for 24 hours. She pulls her equipment and tools out of her locker and checks them over. “We typically check the breathing apparatus — that’s one of the most important pieces of equipment,” Nguyen said.

7:30 A.M. LINE-UP
The crew gathers to discuss staffing, any new material or bulletins released by the department, and the plans for the day. Nguyen and the other rookies are called on to give presentations, or “drills,” on topics from rotary saws to department procedures. “A rookie’s biggest duty is just learning the job. You’re constantly studying,” she said.

8 A.M. HOUSEWORK
“The fire house is our second home. We eat there. We sleep there,” Nguyen said. Like any home, there’s cleaning to do. Rookies get more than their share of the housekeeping, but everyone at the station pitches in. Nguyen may clean bathrooms, the apparatus floor, the kitchen, and more.

10 A.M. DRILLS
The crew heads to a house that was slated for demolition but was instead donated to the department. The veteran firefighters describe a situation the crew might encounter — the fire is on the third floor or someone is trapped in the rear of the building. Crew members react as they would during an actual call, hauling ladders from the truck to the house, cutting holes in the roof, unwinding and positioning hoses, getting the feel of hundreds of pounds of water shooting through their hands.

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Pictured: Anh Nguyen (right) and a fellow crew member search a building for any spot fires after the knockdown of the original fire. Photo courtesy of: Anh Nguyen
12 P.M. LUNCH
As a rookie, Nguyen also gets her share of the cooking toward the end of the probation year. The assigned cook has already shopped and prepared off-duty, so she puts together chicken salad sandwiches. Everyone sits down to eat together. “We interact like a family,” Nguyen said. “We’re in these dangerous situations together, and our lives depend on each other. There’s a different level of bond and attachment there.”

2 P.M. STUDYING
Veteran crew members partner up with the rookies to get them started on their next study topic. Today, Nguyen is learning more department policies. “For the rookie, it’s constant, constant information,” Nguyen said.

2:15 P.M. EMT CALL
The lesson is barely underway when the station receives a medical call from dispatch. In under a minute, the crew is in the fire engine and on their way to the site of the emergency. In L.A., firefighters are the first responders when someone calls 911.

Arriving at the house, they find an elderly man complaining of chest pain. After making sure it’s not a heart attack, the firefighters settle him into a chair.

“We see a lot of things. When you see someone hurt, one of the hardest things is knowing in the back of your mind that this is someone’s family member,” Nguyen said. “On the brighter side, I love interacting with the community because you know you’re impacting their life. When things work out, to them, that’s the best thing that could have happened.”

The crew transports the caller to the hospital for further tests and care.

5:30 P.M. DINNER
Nguyen has cooked one of her signature dishes: salmon. The guys give her a hard time about everything from the fish being overcooked to her drill presentation, but she knows it’s the good-natured razzing all rookies receive and gives it right back.

7 P.M. WIPE DOWN THE RIG
With spray bottles and towels, the crew cleans the outside of the fire engine. It’s accumulated a few layers of dirt from the drill and the multiple runs they have had throughout the day.

“We take a lot of pride in our rig,” Nguyen said. “We want it to be in good condition for the guys who will relieve us the next day.”

7:30 P.M. DON’T WATCH TV
Veteran crew members watch TV, but the rookies aren’t allowed to. For Nguyen, it’s more time to hit the books.

11 P.M. BED
Nguyen and the rest of the crew each make their way to bed. As everyone settles in, the dormitory sounds like a locker room as jokes fly back and forth. The firefighters sleep well but lightly, knowing a call could come at any time.