

Sean Krumpe

When a first-generation Irish immigrant is asked about his reasons for coming to America, he will often answer with one central theme - opportunity. There is a true reason for our title of the "Land of Opportunity." This country is the only in the world where a man can arrive armed with only a dream and rise from poverty to fortune through hard work. This work, however, is never easy. Why would a person who has already faced immense struggle arriving in this country decide to continue with their adversity? This question can be answered by understanding the difficult history of the Irish people.

Whether they were facing famine, foreign occupation, or war, the Irish people have always been known for their strength in facing difficulty. They were no strangers to arduous, exhausting work. It would therefore make sense that Irish-Americans would be some of the most active public safety workers that this country has known. Whether they choose to face the dangers of work as members of America's law enforcement, emergency medical services, or firefighters, Irish-Americans understand, because of difficulties in the past, the importance of hard work. In my family alone, rooted in a proud Irish heritage, my uncle is an active firefighter and my late grandfather was a firefighter for more than forty years. When I look at these relatives, I see a grit that is rarely found in this modern age. This toughness is a result of the difficulty faced raising a poor Irish family in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. My grandfather would not only work long hours as a firefighter, but would often lose the privilege of going home to see his family after a difficult day of work. He would be forced to work one of his several jobs he held in order to support his family. This man was grit personified, and he was only one of the many first and second generation Irish immigrants to use hard work as a means to

rise out of poverty. Firefighter Gahagan indicated that he also was brought up with similar values- hard work, public service and the belief that he could help others drove his ambition to become a part of the brotherhood that is the Philadelphia Fire Department.

Our public safety sector is filled with proud Irish-Americans who share similar backgrounds with my grandfather and Firefighter Gahagan. So many men and women have been raised to understand that, because of the harsh history of the Irish people, they must work hard to help others and ensure the safety of all people, no matter the risks that are imposed upon these public safety workers. Irish-Americans understand that we live in this "Land of Opportunity." Whether it be opportunity to find fortune, to raise a family, or to simply help others, these people, especially those who have chosen a life of serving others in our public safety sector, are the greatest that this country has to offer.

INTERVIEW WITH IRISH-AMERICAN FIREFIGHTER BRIAN GAHAGAN

Do you feel that there is any truth in the idea that the historical struggles of the Irish people have created a culture where hard work is important?

Absolutely, when the Irish first got here, they dug subways, they had to work hard jobs, they so often worked jobs for public safety. The Irish were forced to work this menial labor and public service, and because of this hard work, could eventually hold jobs like doctors and lawyers. Many, like myself, still feel the most valuable work a person to do is work to serve the public.

What effect did your Irish heritage have on your career choice?

Like so many others, my father was a firefighter. I decided to step right into my father's shoes. It wasn't the best job I could get, but we stand on the shoulders of giants, and my father was that giant, so the fire service was the only job for myself.

Do you feel that your upbringing affected your choice to be a firefighter?

Well, yes. Of course, being Irish and Catholic lends itself directly to public service. As an Irish Catholic you want to follow the "Golden Rule," and help others in any way you can. As I've said so many times, being Irish has placed me in a culture based entirely on hard work.

Are you the first member of your Irish family to work in the public safety sector?

My father was also a member of the public safety sector. My son always tells me that he wants to be a fireman, so that is all the motivation I need to continue my work. In truth, though, there are times when you start getting down on the job. What keeps me going are the times when something happens like when I'm in a bad neighborhood and someone who has nothing walks up to me and hands me a bottle of water, that's what makes this job worth doing. Like I said, being an Irish Catholic, living in an Irish Catholic family has shown me why working a job like this where my career is to help people is so very valuable to this country.