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Top Toronto graduates of firefighting school are women

Toronto Fire Services' top three graduating students this year are women.



Katherine Shirriff, right, and Whytney Hooker are two of the three female fire fighters who graduated at the top of their class. This is the first time all three of the top graduates from the Toronto Fire Services were all female. (TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By [DAN TAEKEMA](#) Staff Reporter
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Toronto Fire Services made history this month when, for the first time on record, the top three students in its graduating class were women.

It's a change that's indicative of a growing trend; not only are more women pursuing a career in firefighting, they're also finding places at the top of the ladder in roles like divisional and deputy chief.

Whytney Hooker finished first in the class. Before she began getting serious about firefighting, she owned a painting company and worked for the city.

"I knew at about 13 that I wanted to work in emergency services, but it took until I was about 25 for me to actually pursue it," the 30-year-old said.

Hooker said she wasn't sure initially if she would be strong enough to do the work, but support from friends and family helped her follow her dream.

Often that encouragement came from men, even the guys in her class.

"I think that there's a total change in the generation that's coming in for firefighting and the mentality that women shouldn't be here has more or less been phased out," she said. "It seems like a very inclusive job to be in."



Whytney Hooker used to own a painting company and worked for the city before taking up firefighting and finishing first in the class. (TORONTO STAR)

According to Scott Eyers, who leads the TFS training department, drastic change has come to firefighting even over the course of his career starting with the most basic — a move from using the term “fireman” to “firefighter” — to taking on more systemic problems.

“For many years, firefighting was pretty white, Anglo-Saxon and male-dominated,” he said. “There’s no doubt about it, in the early ’90s this was a tough job, a tough environment for women.”

Past black marks against fire services in Canada include the entire female staff of Richmond, B.C., leaving in the late 1990s after enduring sexual harassment to [Brenda Seymour](#), the lone female member of the Spaniard’s Bay volunteer fire brigade in Newfoundland who reported being intimidated and undermined because of her sex this year.

Eyers estimates that in the past women made up only five per cent of the force, but since 2013 that’s jumped to between 15 per cent and 20 per cent. TFS is reaping the rewards.

“Just being a female, sometimes when they go to a call people are more at ease, especially if it’s a medical call and it’s a woman who needs help,” he said. “The women we’ve hired in the past few years are going a long way and it’s definitely improving the overall makeup of our team.”

Katherine Shirriff finished second in the class — just half a mark below Hooker and narrowly beat out graduate No. 3, Annemieke Struyk.



Katherine Shirriff simulates breaking into a car at the Toronto Fire and EMS Training Centre on Eastern Avenue. (TORONTO STAR)

She studied kinesiology at Laurier University, but ended up applying to become a firefighter through the newly created Firefighter Career Access Program, which allows candidates without formal fire education to qualify and compete for the hiring process through which they'll eventually get their training.

"I love being hands on," she said, explaining that so far she's worked three busy shifts, including attending a two-alarm fire.

Shirriff said one of the best parts of the job is working alongside others who are helping her get used to her new role.

"The team is like a second family. They're your brothers and sisters," she said.

According to Eyers, one of the biggest obstacles blocking women from becoming firefighters is doubting they can do the job.

"I don't think there are too many 8-year-old girls who want to be a firefighter when they grow up," he said. "For example, my wife is a strong woman, but she doesn't think she could do the job."

He said every time a woman joins the force they act as a role model to future female firefighters — a role that both Hooker and Shirriff say they're excited to take on.

"If there's a way that we can grow an interest and plant a seed in girls that this is something they might like to do when they're older, we're happy to be there," Shirriff said.