

The Region

Rookie Firefighter Crushed by Firetruck

By RICHARD FAUSSET
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Jaime Foster used to make her mother call her at 5:30 a.m. so she wouldn't sleep through her morning grunt work as a rookie firefighter: the sweeping of floors, the brewing of coffee, the raising of the flag.

On Sunday morning, the flag was lowered to half staff for Foster, 25, who was crushed under the wheels of a hook-and-ladder truck after three months on the job at Reseda's Fire Station 73.

In front of the station, her co-workers arranged a memorial with flowers, candles and photos. Others sat, dejected, on a back patio smoking cigars, hoping the ritual might help them gather their thoughts. Todd Harris walked to the front of the building, took a long look at the memorial, and cried.

"We haven't seen anything like her in a long time," Harris said. "She gave 110% every minute of the day."

Los Angeles Fire Department officials are investigating the incident, which occurred shortly before 2 p.m. Saturday as Foster and her co-workers were leaving the scene of a house fire in Encino.

Neighbor Bob Bessett, 59, said he saw Foster standing on the back of the truck as it backed slowly out of the 5700 block of Jamieson Avenue. A few seconds later, Bessett saw Foster's injured body lying in the street.

The truck "wasn't moving more than 2 mph," said Bessett. "It seemed like a total fluke."



ETERNAL SMILE: Photo at memorial shows L.A. Fire Department rookie Jaime Foster grinning during her first fire run.
RICARDO DEARATANHA Los Angeles Times

The on-duty death was the first for the Los Angeles Fire Department since March 1998, when three firefighters were killed in a helicopter that was rushing an 11-year-old auto accident victim to Childrens Hospital. It was also the first death of a female firefighter in the department's 133-year history, department spokesman Bob Collis said.

"She had confidence, even though she was a rookie, and even though she was the only female on her shift," said her boss, Capt. Tim McDonell. "She wanted to do everything. ... We had to tell her to stop sometimes."

Mayor James Hahn ordered city offices to lower their flags to half staff in Foster's memory.

Foster, a Palmdale resident, was assigned to the station May 31, after graduating near the top of her training class. A photo on her memorial shows her beaming on her first official run in the station's ladder truck.

Like every Fire Department rookie, Foster was required to work for a year on probationary status at three Los Angeles-area fire stations before becoming a fullfledged firefighter. McDonell

said he had no doubt that Foster was going to make it: She was smart, eager to learn and, as a former college volleyball player, physically up to the challenge.

A friend who signed a memorial poster suggested that fighting fires was Foster's dream job: "We love you," the message said, "and are so happy you finally got to do what you love!"

Foster began earning her colleagues' respect her first day, showing an excellent command of the tools used in firefighting and rescue work, firefighters said. Over the next few months, she made strides in the day-to-day work, which involved climbing on roofs of burning buildings and cutting ventilation holes with a chain saw.

McDonell said Foster made mistakes along the way, but he was impressed that she made a point of learning from them.

On Sunday, however, what the guys were talking about most was Foster's smile. Harris said she'd flash it every time the alarm sounded — no matter how late at night it was. McDonell even remembers ordering her to wipe it off of her face once.

It was one order she couldn't follow.