

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Lillian Bonsignore

Chief, FDNY Bureau of EMS
City of New York

Since her history-making promotion in 2019, Lillian Bonsignore has blazed a trail as the first woman to serve as FDNY EMS chief, and the department's first openly gay 4-star chief.

Her journey to the top started when she was a young, single mom. She had an interest in medicine, so her pediatrician and mentor suggested she become an EMT.

"I fell in love with this job," said Bonsignore, who later became a paramedic. "This felt like home to me. It was exactly everything I needed it to be. It was the adrenalin. It was the service. It was being able to help and not being behind a desk and being on the street in the South Bronx where I was born and raised. Here I am 31 years later. I have worked my way through the ranks. And it's really been an extraordinary career."

Bonsignore talked with NAEMT News about running the nation's largest EMS agency, why she loves the job, how her experiences on 9/11 shaped her and a generation of New York City first responders, and her recent decision to retire. (Her last day on the job was Dec. 30.)

"For the last three decades, my family has worked around my job and service to the city. It's my turn to give back to them for the years of love and support," said Bonsignore, who plans to continue to teach and speak on EMS issues.



Photo credit Nicholas Truong

Can you give us a sense of the size of the FDNY and its Bureau of EMS?

The FDNY consists of 17,000 people. More than 4,500 are in EMS. We have over 10,000 uniformed firefighters, and the rest are civilians. It's a huge organization that services all five boroughs. EMS does 1.5 million runs a year.

You're the highest-ranked woman in the FDNY's uniformed service. Recently, the mayor appointed the city's first female fire commissioner, who oversees the department's \$2 billion budget. Is diversity important in fire and EMS leadership, and why?

Diversity is important everywhere, not only in leadership roles but throughout all organizations. Without having a multitude of perspectives, there is no way of really getting the answer right. We find our strength in each other. We were all born of mothers. We are used to listening to women throughout our lives. It would only make sense for that perspective to be brought to the workplace as well.

We have a lot of different types of cultures and people that we serve in New

York City. The way to get that right is to lean on people who have experience with those cultures, those priorities, to help us serve them better and communicate with them better. Diversity is our strength. We are way stronger together. If I filled a house with plumbers, we wouldn't have electricity. Everybody brings a different specialty and a different perspective, and as a result of that, we get better and stronger.

What do you like best about your job?

I hold EMS very close to me. For me, it's really all about the people. And it's not just the people we serve, although they are a huge part of it. It's the people who serve those people. EMS is such an amazing profession. It is filled with people who are willing to leave their own families to take care of strangers in their darkest time. And that level of service and commitment is just awe-inspiring. I feel honored to be amongst that group.

What I enjoy the most is knowing what we do for those folks who are at their worst moment, and call us and we show up and make a positive difference. We know it doesn't always end in a positive way. But there are people at the end of the

phone line that will show up at your door, with the skills of the emergency room, and give everything they have to keep you alive, solve your problems, care for you.

Take us back to the beginning. How did you get interested in EMS?

I always say, "EMS saved my life." Not in a medical way but in a lifestyle way. When I was very young, two women – one was a doctor and one was an educator – took an interest in a kid from the Bronx.

I was the oldest child of a single parent, and she really wasn't equipped to keep me moving in the direction I needed to be moving in. We struggled, but I always did well in school. That was the one place I could really be myself. I ended up married at a very young age and had a child at 18. At that point, your path forward is filled with obstacles.

The pediatrician said, "Hey, enough is enough. You're going to EMT school." I said, "What's EMT school?" But I trusted her, so I went, thinking it would be temporary.

I worked for a private ambulance service. And I absolutely fell in love with this job. This ended up being the longest summer job I have ever had. But if it wasn't for somebody who just took a moment to care, I would have never made it.



With her mentors, Stacey Weber and Naomi Barber.

Are you still in touch with your mentors?

They both came to my promotion ceremony when I became the chief of EMS. I owe my entire life to that mentoring. They've stuck it out with me

the whole time. I'm in my 50s now, and they are still around me, still loving me, still supporting me.

Can you tell us about your experience during the attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001. Did it change how you approach your work or life?

It changed everybody's life. I was an instructor at the academy when it happened. I had two daughters. I had just started building a relationship with the woman I ended up marrying. She's been with me 22 years now. When we saw it was an actual commercial plane that hit the building, it just stunned us. It almost felt impossible.

The instructors and students commandeered a couple of city buses to pile us in and take us down there. We get there just as the second tower fell and we're enveloped in this dust and debris. Everybody walking past is just gray. We know there are going to be so many people. So many people were in those buildings. I got sent down to what was supposed to be triage. And there were no people to triage. Our unit ended up being a morgue unit instead. We lost 333 of our own that day. How can it not change your life? We lost so many who were so brave and saved so many lives.

It's now 2022. It's a long time ago. We bring all of our probies down there to the reflecting pools, and to the museums, which I can barely get through. When I go down there, I still smell it. It's a trigger.

An event like that changes you. The things that used to bother me, just don't anymore. It did teach me not to sweat the small things. If today is the day I have, I need to make it a good day. Tomorrow isn't guaranteed.

We've lost over 300 people from the fire department from post-9/11 illnesses. This coming year, we are likely to exceed the number we lost on the day the towers came down. Every one of us who were there is being chased by this possibility that you are going to develop cancer or something. We've lost a lot of friends and family members and we continue to do that. We sometimes go to



three or four funerals a week from post-9/11 illnesses. It's a constant barrage of memories of that time. Every one of us who was down there is kind of on the clock. Is today the day? You never know. So let's have a good day.

The amazing thing though is that the folks who are suffering, they wouldn't do anything different. None of us would. If you knew back then what was going to happen, I don't think anybody would change their mind. We were intrinsically driven to respond. That is what EMS, and fire and PD do. They have committed their lives and are willing to risk their lives to save others. It's so deeply ingrained. Even if you had the opportunity to change your mind, you just can't.

Your department recently suffered another tremendous loss when EMS Capt. Alison Russo-Elling, a 24-year veteran, was fatally stabbed outside her station. How are you helping your crews deal with their grief?

Alison was the second FDNY EMS female to be murdered in the streets in five years. We still had the memory of Yadira Arroyo, who was run over by her own ambulance in 2017. These deaths shake you to the core. It's so tragic and painful.

In EMS, we do medicine. We are here to help and deliver a high level of medical care. We are not a threat to anybody. In fact, we don't judge who our patients are. We don't judge what they've done. We deliver the highest level of care whether you are a criminal or not, whether you're rich or poor, whether you believe in God or don't. It doesn't matter to us. We are there to help.

Alison was a firecracker. She loved EMS. She loved the people she worked with. And you could tell, because the people she worked with loved her too. She trained so many people and influenced so many people. She had 30 years of showing up at people's worst moments and saving their lives. She did it on 9/11, and through COVID, and she was rescue medic, which is an elite paramedic in the fire department. She was an amazing woman.

So how do you help people through that? That is the question of the year. Grief is such a personal thing. For me, it was important that I be out there visible with them. At the hospital. That I be by their side. Our pain is a collective pain, but our grief is individual. Our goal is to provide as many outlets as possible for people who need to tap into them as they go through their grieving process. Making sure our clergy is with them. Our peer support is activated. Our counseling services are available.

And simply hugging each other and crying and being normal human beings together. Acknowledging the pain we all feel and not trying to minimize it. As a fire department, we have so much experience with death that it's unbelievable. But the way we handle it is together. We stand shoulder to shoulder with each other. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the family members. We find strength in each other. But we also have to allow people to grieve. Some people may benefit from counseling. Some people may benefit from just hanging out with their friends. Some people may benefit from being in a religious environment. Some just want to be home with their families. Some just want to be silent in the presence of somebody else who feels the same thing.

What are the qualities that make a good EMS leader?

The first is kindness. You must be kind. You cannot expect people who dedicate their lives to service to be treated unkindly. You have to be kind to the people who are kind to others.

You have to listen to people. Even the stuff you don't like to listen to. There are so many different perspectives out there and if you are a leader who is unable to process different points of view, you are going to be a terrible leader. You need to be able to consider other points of view and be able to pivot.

Is FDNY dealing with workforce shortages like other departments around the nation?

We are in much better shape than some, but we share the problem of retaining people. People are looking for jobs that are less dangerous, with more pay, they're not going to get punched in the face, and you don't have to work multiple jobs to pay rent and support your family.



Some of what we've done is engaging with the youth community. We have our own high school, where we start teaching young people about EMS and fire. We are very active in community outreach.

EMS is a young service. Fire and law enforcement have a significant blood line. EMS is just building a blood line. There are a lot of young people who don't even know EMS is an option. Getting out and talking to the younger people about this profession is important. When you listen to law enforcement or firefighters, they talk about it as if it's the greatest thing in the world. In EMS they talk about all the negative stuff. It's like taking a bite of a candy bar and saying, "This is absolutely terrible, do you want a bite?"

We have to remember to sing our own praises. EMS when it started was about moving people off highways. We are not that anymore. We have to figure out how to talk about this and be proud of the job we do as well as what the challenges are.

Why is it important to you to be an NAEMT member?

We are still very young in the profession of emergency services. We're like a 2-year-old compared to college kids being fire and law enforcement. The modern EMS systems we function under have only been around since the late 70s.

Some of the benefits and progress that's been made in law enforcement and fire are the result of minds that are interested in pushing a profession forward, coming together to solve these problems. EMS is still struggling with that. We are still very compartmentalized.

NAEMT really helps us bring some of those resources together. We have to link arms when it comes to the future of EMS. I'm always interested in joining something that can bring us together. We can accomplish any goal if we put our minds together. We just have to be willing to stand together and not fight each other.

What's your favorite spot in all of NYC?

I would recommend anybody in New York City go down to the World Trade Center memorial. We hold very dearly a promise to never forget, and that is a way that we never forget.

Mets or Yankees?

I am a Bronx native so I can only say Yankees. But I'm not big on sports. I think they should be looking at us. They make millions of dollars to play a game and we make peanuts to save lives.