

FDNY's New Counseling Chief Wants to Help Firefighters Become 'Whole' Again

NICK GARBER



Buck Ennis

Ann Kansfield, who in 2015 became the first woman and openly gay person to be an FDNY chaplain, was promoted this year to director of the department's counseling service unit.

DOSSIER

GREW UP Holland, Michigan; Rochester, Monroe County; and New Brunswick, New Jersey

RESIDES Hell's Kitchen

AGE 48

EDUCATION Bachelor's in history, Columbia University; master of divinity, New Brunswick Theological Seminary

FAMILY Kansfield has a son and a daughter with her wife of 20 years, Jennifer Aull — who is also her co-pastor at Greenpoint Reformed Church.

FAMOUS FATHER Kansfield's father, Norman, who died in January, was famously [defrocked](#) as a Reformed Church minister after he officiated at her same-sex wedding in 2004. The stand he took sparked a movement within the church for LGBTQ acceptance.

WELL PREPARED Kansfield is a Protestant, but she jokes that her years of ministry in heavily Polish American Greenpoint, where many people are Roman Catholic, prepared her well for the very Catholic Fire Department.

Ann Kansfield comes from a family of firefighters and clergymen. Her grandfather put out blazes in Chicago; her father was a minister in the Reformed Church of America. Improbably, she has found a way to merge the two worlds.

Fresh out of college in 2001, Kansfield was working on Wall Street. On the morning of Sept. 11, she had been preparing to head to the World Trade Center for a job interview when she learned of the attacks. The near-miss made her question everything.

“You know who they didn’t need on 9/11? Stockbrokers,” she said. “I felt as though I’d been given this gift of life. How did I want to spend it?”

Before long she was enrolled in seminary, and in 2003 she took over a Dutch Reformed church in Brooklyn with a dwindling congregation. In the ensuing years, Kansfield has built the Greenpoint Reformed Church back into a thriving community, delivering sermons and running food distributions while serving as co-pastor with her wife, Jennifer Aull.

“I just love people of all kinds,” Kansfield said. “Serving a church is just an opportunity to find different ways of serving people.”

Kansfield had long revered Mychal Judge, the beloved Fire Department chaplain who was the first official victim of the 9/11 attacks. Around 2015, she learned of a rare opening for one of the FDNY’s seven chaplain positions and was hired — becoming the first woman and openly gay person to hold the job.

The chaplain role is focused on counseling firefighters and FDNY employees, and the legacy of 9/11 continues to loom large. Kansfield spent much of her tenure working with the families of firefighters who died and first-responders who continue to deal with cancer, mental health struggles and addiction that stem from the attacks and the “long, deep season of grief” they caused, she said.

Her work also extends to the general public. Kansfield has routinely been called to the scene of a fire, where she searches out people in distress whom she can counsel without obstructing the firefighting response. She recalled a recent fire at a decrepit home full of squatters, where she took it upon herself to console a woman with an infected leg wound who was screaming at the firefighters.

“I spent a fair amount of time trying to get her to calm down, trying to convince her to go to the hospital,” Kansfield remembered.

Now Kansfield is moving up the ranks. In May Fire Commissioner Laura Kavanagh appointed her to lead the FDNY’s counseling service unit, which offers both professional and peer counseling to department employees struggling with trauma or addiction. The peer unit, too, is an outgrowth of 9/11, created after the FDNY realized that employees often understood one another best.

“As someone who’s had to call 911 in an emergency, I owe so much to the members of the FDNY,” she said.

Unlike her predecessors as the unit’s director, Kansfield is not a licensed therapist, which means her duties will be partly administrative while another employee supervises treatment. Kansfield sees her

unique background as an asset, freeing her up to promote departmentwide efforts to improve mental health instead of one-on-one clinical work.

What animates much of Kansfield's work is the concept of moral injury — the idea that people are born with an innate sense of right and wrong before traumatic events scramble those convictions. She sees her mission as helping FDNY members recover their "innate humanness."

"They do these things which are gut-wrenching and heartbreaking and take a toll on your personhood," Kansfield said. "For me to be able to show my gratitude by trying to help them become as whole a person as possible in response to this, that's an amazingly exciting opportunity."