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Kavehungua Uakurama

Firefighter

Making her Mark in a High-Risk Environment

Firefighters control and put out fires, and respond to emergency situations where life, property, or the environment is at risk. They typically put out fires and find and rescue victims in burning buildings or in other emergency situations.

And while firefighting remains a male-dominated world, more and more women today fight fire alongside their male counterparts. Meet 27-year old Kavehungua Uakurama. She is a firefighter. This is her story:

Marketing vs. Firefighting

Kavehungua was born in Windhoek. She attended primary school at St. Barnabas Primary and enrolled

for a marketing degree at the then Polytechnic of Namibia, now Namibia University of Science and Technology, after she completed her Grade 12 at Eldorado High in Khomasdal, in 2006.

Looking forward to entering the corporate world after graduation, Kavehungua's dreams took a bit of a setback when she fell pregnant. "During my fourth year at the Polytechnic, I fell pregnant with my firstborn. Needless to say, it derailed my academic programme and I had no choice than to put the studies on the backburner for a while. It was a stressful time. I was really looking forward to graduating, but all of a sudden, I had to change my priorities to prepare for motherhood", she explains.

But, determined as she has always been, Kavehungua, after giving birth,



went back in 2011, and completed her degree the next year. It was during this time when she learned about an opportunity at the City of Windhoek's Fire Department. She applied, and the rest as they say, is history. "I knew at the time that the local marketing industry had become very saturated and I decided to take a shot at firefighting, when I saw an advertisement in a local daily that the local Fire Department was looking for new recruits. My friends also encouraged me to give it a go. I ended up making the cut and you know what? I also ended up in a career that I love", she notes.

Self-Sacrifice

Self-sacrifice means you are equally concerned with the wellbeing of others, as much you are with your own. Those who possess this trait have a natural propensity to help others. It is a trait that fire departments look for in new

recruits and a trait that Kavehunga possesses. She is courageous. Willing to take risks and make sacrifices to help others.

"What I really love about this job is the opportunity to help others. Firefighting is a job of service. It's about a willingness and passion to attend to those in need; a willingness to serve and protect; and a passion to be there for others when they need help most. This is what I love most about my job", Kavehunga explains.

Dangerous Work

Firefighters have one of the highest rates of injuries and illnesses of all occupations. They often encounter dangerous situations, including collapsing floors and walls and overexposure to flames and smoke. They wear protective gear, which often can be very heavy and hot, to help lower these risks.

"It is true. Firefighting is very dangerous and taxing work. We work 24-hour, sometimes 48-hour shifts. It requires loads of self-discipline, self-motivation and focus to succeed. But, Firefighters are selfless people. What drives us in overcoming the fear of being injured in the line of duty, is the knowledge that we can be of assistance to someone in need", Kavehunga notes.

While Kavehunga admits to be attracted by the excitement and adrenaline-rush that come with an emergency call, she embraces the responsibility that comes with the job. "It is really all about preparedness and readiness to go out on a call, whatever the time of day. By being well prepared, following safety procedure and applying rigour and responsibility in all we do at an emergency scene, we can better manage the risk of injury. It's part of the job, though. As they

say, it comes with the territory!", she adds.

However, Kavehunga is quick to point out that when not attending to emergencies, firefighters keep busy performing other work at the fire station. "We sleep, eat, and remain on call, here. There is lots to do. Cleaning and maintaining our fire engines; attending to safety drills and school excursions; and continuously upgrading our skills in anti-arson techniques, disaster preparedness and hazardous materials control", she explains.

A Man's World

Their weaker physiology, coupled with persisting gender and cultural stereotypes, continue to impact on the enrollment of women into the male-dominated firefighting sector. Kavehunga too, recognises that as a woman, she faces an uphill battle competing on equal footing with her male colleagues. "Firefighting is still

a male-dominated job. But, more and more women are entering the field nowadays and are able to live up to expectations. I actually think women make excellent firefighters. We are more caring and demonstrate empathy better than our male counterparts. But, it does also help if you work in a conducive environment like ours, where our male colleagues accept and respect us as full equals”, she shares.

Kavehunga is not the first female firefighter trained and employed at the City of Windhoek Fire Brigade. Others before her have paved the way for young women to take up this career path. And although firefighting was not a childhood ambition, it is a career path she has opted for. She has no regrets about not pursuing a career in marketing. What matters to her is that she can be of service to others. “To learn someone is alive, because of the work that I’ve done is what is the most satisfying and rewarding aspect of being a firefighter. What is equally satisfying is when we interact with schoolchildren and young girls are amazed by the fact that women can also be firefighters. It is really rewarding to know that I am inspiring them”, she says.

Support System

As an emergency professional, Kavehunga’s work is inherently pressure-packed. Not only does she have to deal with the stress of putting out fires or helping in emergencies, she also witness property destruction, deaths and injuries.

In dealing with the stress and pressure, Kavehunga relies on a strong support system that allows her to excel in her work. “I am also a wife and a mother. Balancing such a physically demanding and taxing job with the expectations of motherhood is also not easy. But, I am lucky because I can really draw strength from my husband and two daughters, who inspire me to persevere and work harder. They know that this makes me happy and

as such, they continue to inspire me to do my best and to excel in what I do. Furthermore, it helps when you have colleagues who are ready to support you. We are a strong team and we are always there for each other”, she highlights.

Kavehunga Uakurama. Firefighter. Wife. Mother. A servant of her community; a protector of lives; and a safeguarder of property. Her story teaches us that firefighting is a calling that shouldn’t be limited to a person’s gender. That despite the personal

safety risks, there are many deeply rewarding aspects of this job, which makes it a noble and highly satisfying career. Her story also teaches us that success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing, or learning to do. That success is a journey, not a destination. And when the alarm sounds, she responds, regardless of the weather, or time of day.

She is living her passion.

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