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9/11 inspired photographer to get to know firefighters
BOOK | Chicagoan slept at firehouses, went along on calls
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When terrorists knocked down the World Trade Center in 2001, Alan Jacobs showed his respect for the firefighters who died there by buying pizzas and anonymously leaving them at the firehouse near his Chicago home.

The accomplished photographer then came up with a better way to show his feelings: He started accompanying the firefighters, digital camera in hand, to fires, pin-in accidents, gang shootings and more.

For five years, Jacobs, now 72 and living in Uptown, enjoyed extraordinary access while capturing the glory, heartache and soot that come with the job. His work is now part of a 208-page photo album titled: Thank God For These Guys: Chicago's Firemen on the Job (\$39.95, M.T. Publishing).

His photos offer a revealing view of the work done by firefighters throughout the city. That was a chief goal of Jacobs, who's better known as "Jake."

"After [9/11], I started to think about those guys who ran up 70 flights of stairs with all of that equipment and died up there," he said. "I started feeling badly that I didn't really know what they did. So I set out to do a book to show firemen's work from the inside."

Jacobs, who worked 30 years as a psychotherapist, started his project by taking photos of a small fire on his block. He took 8-by-10 glossy prints to the firehouse and gave them to appreciative firefighters. While there, the fire alarm went off.

"They said, 'Hey Jake, you want to ride? Hop on,' " he said. "For the first 30 seconds or so, I was 12 years old, riding on a fire engine. Then they were putting on their masks and their harnesses. I grew up pretty quickly. That's how it started."

He got top department brass to sign off on his ride-alongs and signed a waiver in case he got hurt. He slept at firehouses, got razed at firehouses, washed the engines, scrubbed the floors and sometimes did the dishes. Along the way, he got a truckload of support from firefighters, including Bob Hoff, one of the inspirations for the 1991 movie "Backdraft."

Hoff, now an assistant deputy fire commissioner, wrote a foreword for Jacobs' book. Hoff said he was proud when he learned of the book's title and noted that Jacobs "did a great job" capturing the daily drama.

Jacobs "would come home exhausted, covered in soot, spitting black stuff," his wife, Kryisia, said. "But he never said he was in over his head."

The meaning of brotherhood is the most important thing Jacobs, an only child, learned during the project. "One of the biggest things that ever happened in my life was when they started calling me 'brother.' "

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