

Jan Jefferson was one of the very first women ever hired to the Madison Fire Department. A member of the historic class of 1980, Jefferson was a trailblazer for women in the fire service throughout her career.

While her résumé would show she was a firefighter, paramedic, and lieutenant, we also remember her legacy as a woman of wisdom, great compassion, courage, strength, and creativity.

"Jan just had 'it,'" remembers retired Apparatus Engineer Karen Hoffman, who worked with Lt. Jefferson at Fire Station 3 on Williamson Street. "There was never a doubt that she was a leader. Jan never wavered in her decision making on a call or how she felt about life in general. She gave clear, concise orders; shared her expectations of you on the crew; and was there for anyone in time of need."

Early in her firefighting career, Lt. Jefferson felt that by fully showing up and working hard, she and her Class of 1980 classmates could show that women and others who are underrepresented had much to offer in the fire service and our communities. Over time, according to her close friend and academy classmate Denise Sullivan, Jefferson felt women could accomplish even more by encouraging more cooperation and teamwork, versus competition, in the initial training of firefighters; by improving training and educational opportunities; and by pursuing leadership roles themselves.

Jefferson recognized early on that first responders need to take better care of their mental health. She was an early advocate for Critical Incident Debriefings, which are designed to assist others in dealing with emotional, physical, and psychological symptoms that are generally associated with trauma exposure. Debriefings allow those involved with the incident to safely process the event and reflect on its impact. Jefferson strove throughout her years as a paramedic and lieutenant to improve that process for everyone in the Madison Fire Department.

In addition to being remembered as knowledgeable, resourceful, and resilient with astounding inner strength, Jan Jefferson is also hailed as a voice for equal opportunity with a strong sense of justice and fairness. "She was never afraid to say what needed to be said," remembers retired Lieutenant Laura Agostini.

Jan was a volunteer and activist, and she was one to use her vacation time to help the park service working on trail restorations out west or by participating in some other activity that made the world a better place. She loved gardening and became a Master Gardener in Hawaii after retiring from the MFD. She traveled widely, was a wide-ranging and avid reader, and was an athlete with a special love for softball, rugby, and football. She loved spending as much time as possible outdoors hiking, paddling, and camping, preferably with her dog and a good friend.

"She was a deeply sensitive person and was always there when needed," remembers Jan's friend and former MFD fire code enforcement officer Leslie Giguere.

Jan Jefferson passed away in 2019 after a long battle with Alzheimer's Disease. To honor her legacy, IGNITE: Women of the Madison Fire Department has established an educational scholarship in her memory. We hope to inspire the next generation of women leaders in the fire service, just as she had.