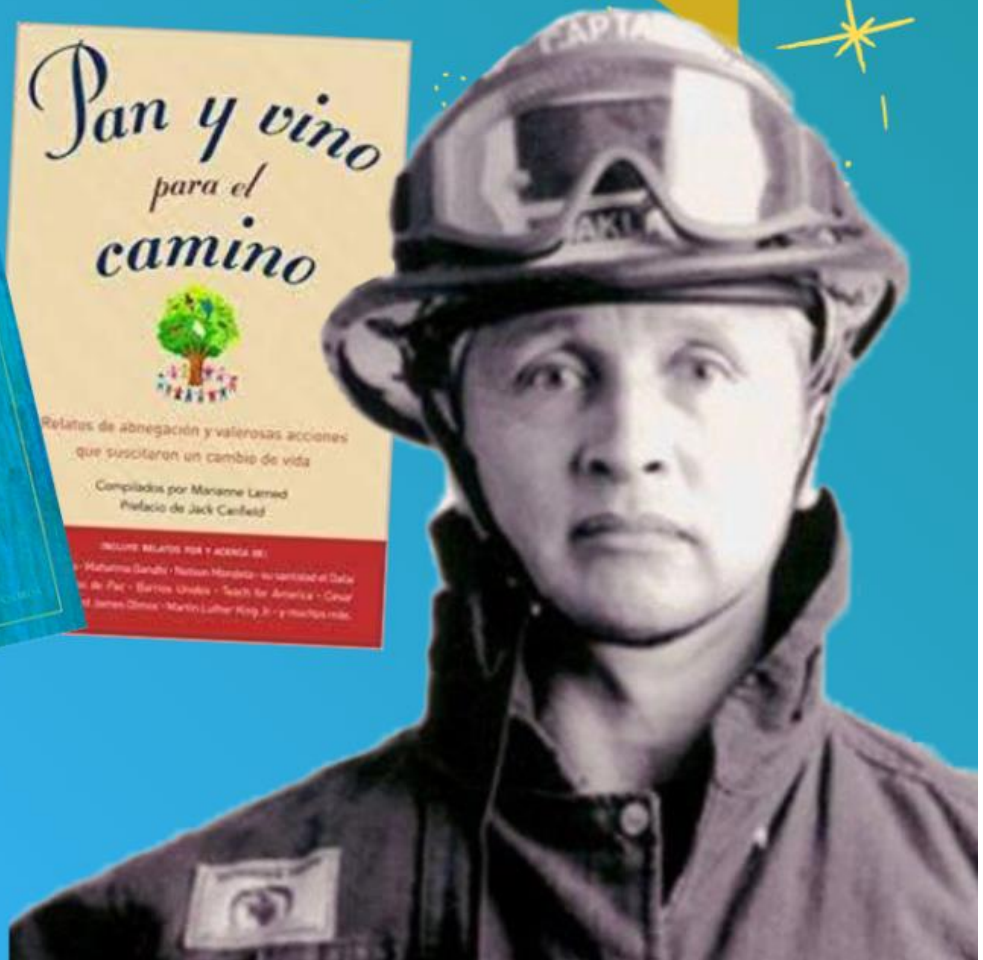
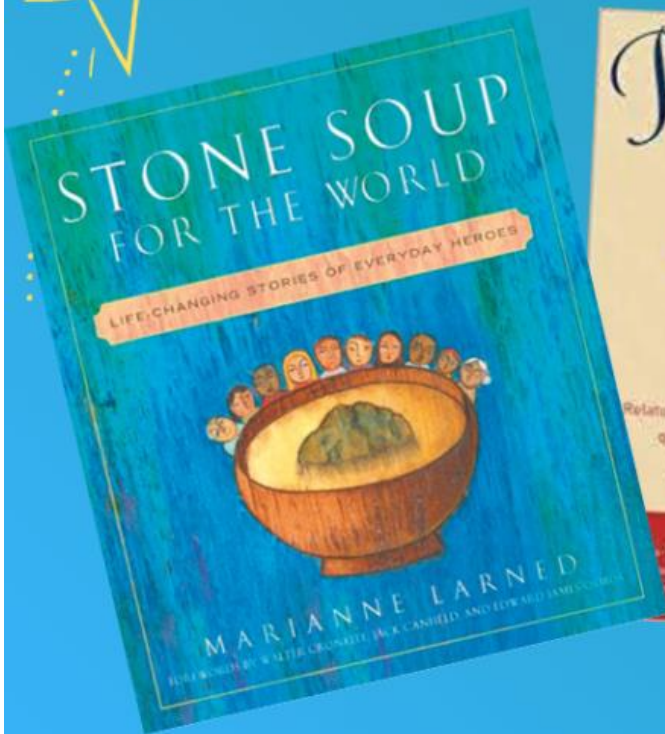


Story of the Week!

Oakland's
Firefighting
Peacemaker



@stonesoupleader

FIREFIGHTER'S PRAYER

When I am called to duty, God wherever flames may rage,
give me strength to save a life, whatever be its age.
Help me to embrace a little child before it's too late,
or save an older person from the horror of that fate.
Enable me to be alert to hear the weakest shout,
and quickly and efficiently to put the fire out.
I want to fill my calling and to give the best in me,
to guard my neighbor and protect his property.
And if according to your will I have to lose my life,
bless with your protecting hand my loving family from strife.

OAKLAND'S FIREFIGHTING PEACEMAKER

On Sunday, September 23, 2001, New York City honored the six thousand* victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and United Airlines Flight 93, in a mass memorial service at Yankee Stadium. When Bette Midler sang "Did I ever tell you you're my hero?" she gave words to people who were speechless with grief. She expressed the pride and gratitude people felt, especially for the 344 firefighters who'd lost their lives that day, "just doing their jobs," that is, selflessly risking their lives, to keep their promise to "preserve life and property," and saving over 25,000 people.

*At the time, this was the estimated number of missing and dead. The number has since been revised downward to under three thousand.

Oakland's fire captain, Ray Gatchalian, joined his "brothers," some of the twelve thousand New York City firefighters and their families, that day. "They showed us what it means to be a hero," says Ray. "They exemplify the best in all of us."

Ray had been at "Ground Zero" that week, along with thousands of other firefighters from across the country and around the world, who came to help New York City firefighters search night and day for their colleagues. "It's about showing up when things get tough," says Ray. "The courage and the kindness that I experienced there was incredible." Local firefighters appreciated the help; one New York City fireman said simply, "Thanks for being here." Ray couldn't have imagined being anywhere else. Through all his years as a firefighter, his ears had become very sensitive to the call of duty. Ten years earlier, on October 20, 1991, he'd shown up for what became known as the largest wildland urban fire in U.S. history.

Exhausted from fighting a five-alarm grass fire the day before, Ray was at home resting when he was rudely interrupted. His electricity went out. Fierce winds outside his window shrieked at him in a voice all too familiar. From his deck Ray could see the smoke and flames. There was the sound of a helicopter overhead, and a voice from a loudspeaker: "Evacuate the area! Evacuate the area, now!"

Ray thought of his wife, their daughter, their home and elderly neighbors, and for a few moments, he was torn: "Do I stay here with them, or do I go and fight the fire?" After securing their safety, Ray closed the door to his house, thinking it might be for the last time. He climbed into Oscar, his faithful '65 Chevy pickup truck, and headed to Fire Station 15, where he and another off-duty firefighter, John Americh, loaded up the few remaining hoses and nozzles and made Oscar their honorary fire engine.

They sped to the edge of the fire, where it was threatening to jump into the next canyon. In the intense heat of the first hour, the fire was consuming homes at the rate of one every five seconds. By the end of that day, twenty-five people would lose their lives, 3,276 homes would be destroyed, 1,520 acres would be scarred, and in its ashes the fire would leave an estimated \$1.52 billion in damages, the largest wildland urban fire in U.S. history.

STONE SOUP FOR THE WORLD

In all his years, Ray had never seen a fire burn with such ferocity. He recalls, "I had fought in Vietnam. I'd witnessed the destruction of civil war in El Salvador, and pulled bodies from earthquakes in San Francisco and Oakland. But I wasn't prepared to see the devastation of my own community. I was stunned, in total shock."

Ray called the fire department dispatcher and pleaded for help, but there was nothing left to send. All twenty-three fire engines and seven fire trucks were already on the fire lines. When the dispatcher replied, he realized they were on their own: "Ray, I will do the best I can to get someone up there, but I can't promise. God bless."

By now the fire threatened to engulf the entire neighborhood if they didn't somehow slow it down. Several onlookers offered to help, and Ray quickly organized them into a makeshift fire brigade. He looked warily at his volunteers—a dozen young, untrained, unprepared people—but what they lacked in experience, they made up for with spirit.

With nothing but the spare equipment they'd loaded onto Oscar, Ray led his makeshift crew in a courageous three-hour stand against the fire. The angry red monster roared, ready to turn on the firefighters without a moment's notice, but they roared back, saving many homes in the vicinity and preventing its advance to the adjacent canyon, where it would have gained even more strength. But their work was far from over.

When the fire engines finally arrived to relieve them, one of Ray's volunteers, Rich Stover, heard that his own mother's home was on fire. His new brothers, as firefighters come to know one another, were not about to let the fire destroy one of their own. So, exhausted but determined, they took their limited resources and regrouped to save Rich's mother's home and six of her neighbors'. In the heat of those critical hours, Rich, a twenty-eight-year-old general contractor, decided to become a firefighter. He explained, "Fighting the fire with Ray changed my life. It rekindled my desire to help others."

TV cameras from around the world captured dramatic footage showing the magnitude of the devastation, but they missed the selfless heroism of these volunteers and hundreds of others like them, without whom the loss of life and property would have been catastrophic. "Some say they were stupid, while some would say it was valor," Ray says now. "But once you face such a monstrous thing, your life is transformed."

Ray has other battles to fight and people to rally. A Vietnam Green Beret veteran now dedicated to peace, he once got doctors to donate their services to refugees, and then influenced Congress with his award-winning documentary film to stop military aid to El Salvador. He's organized a month-long, round-the-clock, torch-bearing vigil in his Oakland community to build solidarity against violence and create peace. He now works with incarcerated young people in Alameda County and provides scholarships to street children in Mongolia. Upon his return from New York City, Ray invited the Oakland community to create "Celebrate Courage" and raised \$75,000 for the 15,000 children who lost a parent in the tragedy.

Ray would be the first to tell you he's just a regular guy. You decide. He credits his father with instilling in him the desire to help others. "We're here to inspire one another, to bring out the best in each other," his father told him. On September 11, the New York City firefighters did just that, and their example will inspire thousands of young people to become firefighters.

Firefighters are essential front-line workers, especially with today's climate change. International Firefighters' Day invites you to Shine Your Light for Firefighters on May 4-5th.