

Ziemba Photographic Arts

Behind the Lens of Stronger Than Steel

By **Debbie Jefferson**, Editor

Upon retirement, many a first responder has been known to lament the lack of photographic proof of their heroic work. But for hundreds of fire fighters and law enforcement agents in Southern Arizona that fact changed dramatically four years ago when photographer Roni Ziemba created the Stronger Than Steel project. Ziemba began this venture at the behest of the Tucson based “Heroes Day” committee. It was a journey that no one, including herself, could predict where it would lead.

“I spent 20 years as a professional photographer, and a lifetime as an adventurer, preparing for this work. Even so, I was amazed at how quickly it captured my full attention,” Ziemba says with an enormous grin. “Honoring these men and women in the line of duty, and creating art that expresses their sacrifice, has been a dream come true for someone like

me.” She adds, “I have had the rare opportunity to witness first-hand the risk involved in protecting our communities.”

Ziemba has devoted over 2,000 hours a year to the imagery that can currently be seen in three books and as 87 fine art pieces installed in numerous public spaces. These spaces include the Tucson International Airport, the University of Arizona Medical Center and various departments and agencies throughout Tucson.

The Northwest Fire District purchased 30 pieces for the lobby, conference room and halls of their newly built, nine-million dollar, training center. NWFD PIO Capt. Adam Goldberg raves about the art display, “Typically when a new fire department facility needs to purchase art they are faced with only two choices: generic fine art that usually does not represent what fire fighters do, or amateur images of their



own crews that are, at best, mediocre. Occasionally a good newspaper shot perks up the walls, but those are few and far between. It has been an honor to have beautiful displays of our own men and women for visitors to get lost in.”

Working diligently on behalf of the first responders she promotes has garnered Ziemba some high level fans. Retired NWFD Chief Jeff Piechura said of Ziemba, “Her passion to capture through the lens of the camera – the essence of the incident, the tragedy and the outcomes – has been extraordinary.” Tucson Fire Department Assistant Chief Joe Gulotta, a passionate Stronger Than Steel supporter, says “Roni Ziemba has proven herself as one of the top public safety photographers in the country. Her ability to tell our story through photographs is a real gift.”

The road into this field has not been an easy one for Ziemba and Stronger Than Steel. Building trust in dangerous situations has happened through due diligence on her part. She has adamantly maintained the integrity required

Photography by Ziemba Photographic



to preserve the dignity of her subjects. Her personal mandate says that she will never change the content of any image. Every firefighter, agent or officer that she photographs can be assured that, while the image will most certainly be artistically enhanced, no details will be added or omitted. This trust is why Ziemba has been allowed unprecedented access to multi-agency situations both in the real world and in training.

Ziemba was the exclusive photographer at the triennial Tucson Airport Authority - Mass Casualty Drill, as well as the funeral of fallen Tucson Fire Department Investigator Tom Quesnel. She occasionally rides with the Tucson Police Department S.W.A.T. Team during operations, and frequently rides with the US Marshals Service as they round up federal fugitives.

Fire departments and law enforcement agencies alike



know that the scene will be maintained, and the anonymity of those involved will be preserved. Ziemba has proven to them that she is self sufficient during chaotic incidents, and does not need to have her hand held. This relationship of trust assures them that they can freely perform their duties, and that in the end, there will be unique and powerful images that tell their stories.

What she has found beyond the yellow caution tape is a rare look into the life and death moments that make up an ordinary day for our first responders. Stronger Than

Steel pulls back the curtain and reveals the in-the-moment bravery rarely seen by an outsider. As her contacts grow, Stronger Than Steel gains followers and its horizons expand. Ziemba ends by saying “I am grateful for the thirst that drives me further toward the hidden moments, and blessed to tell the stories of just some of our American Heroes.”

Stronger Than Steel images can be seen at www.ziemba-photo.com and www.facebook.com/strongerthansteelusa.

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