

One of my most important community contributions is the fact that I am an Emergency Medical Technician and Firefighter at my local Fire Department. My experience in my local department opened many doors for me. I am a Recruit Leader in my fire department's youth program, which means that I support a group of twenty recruits preparing for the EMT-B and Firefighter-1 certifications. I facilitate drills and activities to hone skills needed to complete a ride-along with our senior members. We also respond to emergency calls, provide medical assistance, and assist with extinguishing fires.

This was just the beginning for me. I applied to the Firefighters Association to the State of New York, Junior Leadership Council. I am now the Vice President on that council. We are the first junior firefighting council in the entire country. The work we are doing is helping youth across the nation. We are addressing the needs of youth ensuring they get the support that they require in the fire service. This position has allowed me to help others on a large scale and better understand the position of peers who do similar things to me throughout the state.

Early in my training, I faced an experience that has always stayed with me. I arrived at a call to find a patient in the ambulance. At this point, I wasn't confident the officer on the call knew I spoke Spanish and pushed me to go see if the lead EMT needed help. The lead EMT brought me over to the patient's father and asked me to explain the injury and answer questions. I remember the relief on the father's face when I spoke Spanish. It occurred to me that a quarter of the people where I live don't speak English, and that the other three quarters don't speak Spanish. Now, as a bilingual EMT, I am able to assist people in stressful situations. Providing comfort by simply introducing myself in their native language is rewarding. I am no longer afraid to ask an officer if they require a translator, or tell a paramedic that I speak Spanish. As my involvement in the department grows, instead of being known as "*Ava the junior member*", I am known as "*Ava who speaks Spanish.*"

My experiences throughout my time as a firefighter and EMT have brought rewarding yet challenging experiences for me. I am often the only female on a call, and the pushback from male peers adds a layer of complexity. Opening a fire hydrant requires considerable strength, and well-meaning male colleagues will typically ask if I need their assistance. Learning to help my male colleagues understand that I possess the same skill set has made my firefighting career more complicated but also more rewarding.

Since I had never faced gender stereotypes, I began to read *The Coddling of the American Mind* by Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt. The book has helped me realize that I should not assume my colleagues have harmful intentions. By changing my mindset, I am able to create a more collaborative environment. This has carried over to other aspects of my identity as well. When it is assumed that I am white because I don't appear stereotypically Puerto Rican, or that my last name means that I am only Jewish, I no longer allow these small interactions to define me. My complex identity allows me to connect with many members in my community. It allows me to support and respect others while also feeling the same.