



Vina Drennan at home:
“Trying to change a culture is
lonely work,” she says,
“but this is more important
than anything now.”

Bridget Besaw Gorman

The Education of Vina Drennan

She was an ordinary firefighter’s wife—
until she learned that fires like the one that
claimed her husband’s life can be easily prevented.

by Jon Wilson

THE WATTS STREET FIRE in Greenwich Village seemed routine when the alarm sounded on that March night in 1994, but a severe backdraft changed everything, killing one young New York City firefighter immediately and another who died the next day. Captain John Drennan, a twenty-five-year NYFD veteran, suffered third- and fourth-degree burns over 65 percent of his body. During the long days when John fought for his life at Manhattan’s Weill Cornell Medical Center, Vina Drennan prayed hard that her husband would survive and return to their home and four children. But the more she saw of his suffering, the more she worried about what would happen if he *didn’t* die. Fire had destroyed much of the flesh and muscle of John’s legs and back, and he endured a dozen operations as doctors repaired what they could. It was Vina’s picture of hell. “Forty days on the burn unit brought home that horror,” she says, “and the doctors didn’t know if they could ever manage his pain.” Reluctantly, she began coming to terms with the possibility that death might be merciful for him. Then, on May 7, 1994, John Drennan’s struggling heart stopped, and he could not be resuscitated. The funeral in New York was a powerful tribute to his character and career.

Alvina Drennan was a “typical” firefighter’s wife. She and John had attended Staten Island’s Tottenville High School and Wagner College, where they began dating. They married in 1967 and started a family. Vina taught third grade. “Basically,” she recalls, “I lived with this firefighter my whole adult life, and I never thought about fire. It was his job. But those forty days changed my life.

All around you are rooms filled with people suffering; not just the loss of my own husband, but all these lives totally destroyed.”

The fact that the Watts Street fire was an “accident” made it all the more difficult. “Probably somebody just as nice as you or me had placed a bag of garbage on top of the stove and gone out to dinner,” she says. “We’ve all done this sort of thing. I’ve left my muffins in the oven too long and gone out to jog. But we lose over 4,000 people a year to fire in America, and acts of carelessness lead to this horrible death rate.” Before Watts Street, Drennan’s reaction to the fatality rate would have been, “Oh well, that’s *fire*.” But months later, she stumbled on the astonishing fact that, for all of this country’s sophisticated fire detection, fire suppression, and medical technology, we also have one of the highest fire fatality rates among the world’s industrialized countries. She also discovered that the subject of prevention doesn’t interest many people—especially the firefighting industry.

Her education began simply, while she was still struggling with her loss. About nine months after John died, Howard Safir, then New York’s fire commissioner, offered Drennan a desk at headquarters. She spent several weeks there, reading every fire-related publication she could. One day, an article in the *New York Times* reported on our high fire fatality rates. The source material was on hand at the office, and Drennan studied the findings. “If it’s not happening in other industrial countries,” she wondered, “why is it happening *here*?”

The study’s conclusions summed it up. “[This] is a call to reconsider how we build our homes, how we put