

# A nurse went to New York to work; found the firefighter who had saved her life

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.05.20

Word Count 661

Level 790L



Deirdre Taylor (left) met Eugene Pugliese (right), the New York City firefighter who saved her from a burning building 36 years ago. Photo: Deirdre Taylor

For more than 30 years, Deirdre Taylor wanted to meet the firefighter who saved her life. She only knew him through some black-and-white newspaper photos.

Those pictures appeared on the front page of the New York Daily News on December 30, 1983. At the time, Taylor was only 4 years old. The photos showed her cradled in the arms of firefighter Eugene Pugliese, who had just carried her out of her burning apartment building.

Taylor is now a nurse in Alexandria, Virginia. She has kept the Daily News article all these years, and she had always wished she could find Pugliese and thank him.

Taylor hasn't lived in New York since the fire. She tried to find Pugliese online many times, but had no luck.

## One Last Chance

But finally, in March, Taylor thought she may have one last chance to find him.

With her family's support, she decided to move from Virginia to New York for eight weeks to work in an overwhelmed Manhattan emergency room. She wanted to try to help save the lives of coronavirus patients, while searching for the man who saved hers.

She promised herself she would "track him down, or track a family member down, and just say thank you.

"Had he not been there," she said, "I would not be alive today."

Pugliese retired from the fire department in 1996 and is now 75 years old.

Saving Taylor's life was the highlight of his career, Pugliese said. He still remembers the day clearly. It began when a man came running up yelling that there was a fire.

Pugliese rushed to the burning building, where thick smoke was pouring out of a sixth-floor apartment. He went into the apartment and found it engulfed in flames.

Taylor's mother was crying, "My baby! My baby!" Pugliese remembered. He quickly helped her out, then returned on his hands and knees. He crawled through burning and blinding smoke until he felt the child.

She was unconscious. He gave her mouth-to-mouth to bring her back, then rushed down six flights of stairs to get her to an ambulance. Suddenly, she woke up and started to cry.

"I was just in the right place at the right time," he said.

Pugliese later received a medal for Taylor's rescue.

Taylor did not have much time to search for Pugliese during her first two weeks in New York. Her emergency room was just too busy. She did go to the firehouse where Pugliese once worked. However, they were not allowing visitors, due to COVID-19.

But on May 18, Taylor finally got a break, when a group of firefighters came to her emergency room. Taylor asked them how she might be able to find a retired fireman.

One of the firemen gave her the fire chief's number. She called and explained her mission to find Eugene Pugliese. All the while, she was expecting to hear that he had died.

"Oh, Gene?" the chief told her. "He stops by the firehouse all the time."

"I couldn't believe it," Taylor said. "I really didn't think he was still going to be around."

The chief phoned Pugliese right away, and less than an hour later, Taylor's phone rang.

"It's Gene Pugliese," he said. "I'm the firefighter who rescued you that day."

Finally, Taylor was able to say what she had wanted to say for years.

### **Plenty In Common**

Pugliese told her the story of the fire, and she told him the story of her life afterward. They learned they had plenty in common. For example, both are big fans of the New York Yankees baseball

team.

After the call, "I cried for the rest of the day," Pugliese said.

Taylor and Pugliese would have liked to meet in person, but Taylor said that would be too risky since she is around COVID-19 patients every day. However, they hope to meet in the future.

"I'd love to go to a Yankees game with her," Pugliese said.