

Waco Fire Chief Sparks A Flame For Health And Fitness

Chief Tatum leads a brigade in a transformative journey promoting physical and mental resiliency. Not just for himself, but for the people he works alongside as well as the community they serve and the city of Waco.

By Charlie Sheridan

New Waco Fire Chief Bobby Tatum Jr. is upbeat and exudes enthusiasm for his profession. He seems to fill somewhat of a father role, coming alongside his staff and challenging them to be the best firefighters they can be. And this includes encouraging – but never forcing – firefighters to be fit and active. It's clear physical fitness is one area Tatum is passionate about, both for himself and the men he leads.

Tatum, who began as fire chief in May after 31 years with Ft. Worth Fire Department, says he's excited to be in Waco during a time of growth and opportunity. Waco has the same small-town feel as Ft. Worth, where he grew up, he says. He is looking forward to enjoying everything his new hometown has to offer, like walking in Cameron Park and near the river. Tatum shared his thoughts on a healthy lifestyle, including what it takes to stay fit for serving the community.

How do you define healthy?

I define healthy as being the best person I can be both inside and out, being able to live in a manner that brings joy. Health should be about mind, body and spirit. I believe the key to good health is incorporating good eating habits and regular exercise and maintaining a positive mental attitude. I believe emotional health and physical health are synonymous. Living a healthy lifestyle not only benefits the individual but everyone around them.

How often do you exercise?

My goal is to participate in some form of physical fitness activity at least three to five days per week. I usually go to the gym and lift weights or do cardio, but occasionally I will take a break and work out at home using workout videos.

What's your exercise routine?

I wake up in the morning with a prayer, because I try to live day to day. I have realized you can't carry over yesterday to today, because it will just wear you out. Because life's not perfect and we all make mistakes, I try to start every morning fresh with a prayer and then I start physical activity.

Most of the time my workout routine consist of 10 minutes of stretching, 10 to 15 minutes on the treadmill or elliptical machine, then 30 to 40 minutes of weight training focusing on a different body group each time. In addition to physically working out, I like to devote time to support my mental health by hobbies such as reading and meditation.

What do you eat to stay healthy?

I don't follow a strict diet. I do however try to incorporate more fruits and vegetables and drink water throughout the day. I eat mostly chicken and seafood. Mostly grilled or baked, not fried. I do take dietary supplements to make up for my dietary shortfalls.

The stereotype is that all firemen are good cooks. Have you developed some special recipes over the years?

I have, but I can tell you they aren't that healthy. Instead, I grill a lot. At the firehouse, to really fit in when you start on the job as a young guy, you have two or three different recipes that you can cook when it's your turn. So yes I learned a few things, but I can tell you none of them are that healthy. You have to have a balance, which I've lacked sometimes over the years, but I do think it's important.

How do you make sure you get enough sleep?

The fire service is different because it's a very odd schedule, and I've worked both 24 hours on and 48 hours off and the traditional 8 to 5 schedule. I've noticed a difference in the ability to manage life working a regular schedule. When you work the 24/48, you get used to that lifestyle and the different times that you can sleep. Some days you get to sleep a full eight hours, and then some nights at the station you're up all night and then you try to compensate the next day.

I look at 10 o'clock as time to really shut it down. If I don't feel like I want to sleep, I turn the TV off and pick up a book and usually that helps me to sleep. That's from a fire station tradition of quiet time. If you were watching TV at 10 o'clock, you had to turn it off or be considerate of others. I kept that. Between 10 o'clock at night and 7 in the morning is usually my quiet time.

What do you do for your mental health?

It's important to me to have a great support system and to stay connected to people who inspire me, people I care about. I have mentors I keep in touch with to bounce ideas off of, to stay fresh and to be encouraged. I send text messages daily, when things come to my mind, to a group of friends in the fire service in various cities. I know they have busy schedules and I know they can't easily pick up a phone, but I text things that are going on or a motivational quote or something. We do that for each other. So throughout the day I may get a text on something or a joke or

something inspirational, and it kind of re-charges you, brightens your day, because you hear from friends you don't see a lot.

How do you hope to incorporate your views on healthy lifestyle to your new role as fire chief?

For the overall safety and health of our firefighters we need to have annual health and fitness assessments. To further assist firefighters in maintaining a high fitness level they need to have the ability to exercise while on duty, our current policy supports it and so do I. One of my goals is to ensure each fire station has workout equipment – to have at least a treadmill, a stationary bike and free weights. Due to city financial constraints, one option may be to ask local gyms to donate their old equipment to the fire department. Another option would be to seek grants to purchase physical fitness equipment. Firefighter fitness is extremely important, and it is essential to long term health and wellbeing on and off the job.

I think anything that we can do to help us perform our jobs better is very important. I want to encourage members of the Waco Fire Department to embrace living a healthy lifestyle that will benefit them not only during their fire service careers but so they live to enjoy a long and productive life with their families after retirement.



Fire Chief Bobby Tatum Jr. leading by example as he gets in a gym session after a long day of work at the Fire Station. Photo by Amber Adamson.