

# Igniting WaterFire

I am standing at the head of a boat holding a lit torch above my head. I can't see what is going on behind me. There is only the sound of water moving beneath the boat, and the epic songs of a soundtrack blaring from speakers in the middle of the river. I am dressed all in black, from head to toe, and my hair is up in a ponytail (no hairspray).

This is the moment when water meets fire.

Typically, WaterFire guest lighters come from the organizations sponsoring the WaterFire. But today, there is no guest lighter on the wood boat *Phoebus*, and so another first-time volunteer named Christine and I are given the opportunity to add wood to the fires throughout the night.

The night started with a volunteer check-in next to the river. Before the sun has set, and the fires are lit, there are hordes of people wearing black, scurrying around and through the river. For full lightings, staff and volunteers are on site setting up WaterFire from 5am, and on site the night before, too.

And of course leading up to the event, the food trucks, merch table and volunteers all have to be organized. There are around 25 staff members and 200 to 350 volunteers working to make each event happen and keeping track of tons of random details that must be sorted out. For example, in the staff meeting leading up to WaterFire, there was a 10-minute conversation about where the most appropriate place was for the "Public Caresser" performance artist to do his ... caressing? It turns out that the crowd, moving outward and backward from him, causes bottlenecks.

As far as WaterFire volunteer positions go, I'm certain I've gotten the best deal as I stand on *Phoebus* to help light and feed the fires. During a full lighting there are seven wood boats that are used, all named for Greek gods, goddesses and heroes, but because today is the basin lighting, with only the braziers in the circular Waterplace Park and leading up to Providence Place Mall being lit, only four wood boats will be used.

Barb is our short, spunky captain who decided to learn to drive boats and be a boat captain at 62 years old, after several years volunteering for WaterFire in other capacities. She and her equally friendly first mate Chris welcome us on board. Chris takes us through the safety precautions and the ideal technique of adding wood to the fire before we get going.

Moving through the river, we see how the wood for the fire is stored in every nook and crevice beneath the canal, stacked up in piles beneath the bridges. We don't go straight to the basin, but once we get close, we slow and wait for the perfect timing.

American Idol contestant David Hernandez is performing the pre-lighting show, but it's not possible to see or hear much from the boat, waiting further down the river for our cue. Eventually, a circle of people holding torches form a circle around Waterplace Park, and our boat begins to move into the center of them. We see the smiling faces of the Met's students, whose 20th anniversary is being celebrated. Christine moves to the front of the boat and holds her torch up to the torch of a person on land. Once our torch is lit, the boat takes us next to the braziers where the wood has been prepared,

and Christine begins to move the torch downward to light the fire before passing it back to me.

What if the fire doesn't light? What if I drop the torch? What if I knock all the logs out of the brazier? And fall off the boat in the process?

But there I am - holding the torch above my head, dressed in black and standing at the front of *Phoebus*. Suddenly, I feel unstoppable. Lowering the torch, I make sure it makes contact with a newspaper and paraffin filled wick in the center of the logs. Within mere seconds, the wick ignites, and before long, all of the wood is up in flames.

*For information on becoming a WaterFire volunteer, go to [waterfire.org/volunteer](http://waterfire.org/volunteer).*