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Knowing in advance what you face when the dispatcher sends you to a commercial building that's on fire is crucial. Making sure those plans are in place is the reason Burleson Fire Department Engineer Robert Schoonover was awarded the 2014 Firefighter of the Year honor. He accepted the accolades at the department's annual banquet Jan. 17.

Schoonover took the lead on creating pre-fire plans of all commercial and industrial buildings in the City. Burleson Fire Chief Gary Wisdom said that when you arrive on the scene is not the time to try to find exits, the locations of utilities, the nearest hydrant, or what is housed or manufactured in the building.

"Pre-fire plans give the firefighters an opportunity to get inside these buildings and find out what is in there," the chief said. "The firefighters use this information from the pre-plans during an actual incident, when needed.

Schoonover has been part of the Burleson Fire Department since 1998 when he began volunteering. He was hired as a career firefighter in April 2003. The 46 year old, who now lives in Burleson, said he applied with Burleson because "you get that hometown feel living here in Burleson . . . the people here are very friendly. Burleson was just beginning a career fire department in 1998. I knew there was going to be a lot of growth and I wanted to be part of it."

Firefighting has fascinated the award winner since he was a youngster living in Forest Hill.

"I lived less than half a block from the fire department," he said. "I spent many days just hanging around there talking to the guys, seeing how they treated people. As a young kid, it left a lasting impression. I wanted to pass that on to others."

Schoonover said a firefighter has to have "a strong desire to want to help people, and by helping I don't mean it has to be a medical emergency or a fire. We help folks out when they have a flat tire, when they run out of gas on the side of the road, and when they need batteries changed in their smoke detectors. There is so much more to being a firefighter. Growing up, I was taught to help others in need. While we were on vacation, my Dad would pull over and help someone

who had broken down. It's gratifying to see the look on someone's face when you help them and don't expect anything in return other than a simple "thank you."

That need to help rubbed off on his sister too. She is a retired nurse.

Schoonover graduated from high school in 1987 and attended Navarro College Fire Academy. He is certified as an emergency medical technician (EMT), hazardous materials technician, swift water rescue technician, vehicle rescue technician, and advanced firefighter. He earned the 2003 Career Rookie Firefighter of the Year award and the 2013 Fire Chief's Award.

Schoonover is married to his wife Barbara and they share two sons, 22-year-old Cody and 13-year-old Austin.