

MIAMI BEACH

Female firefighter named division chief



MATIAS J. OCNER/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

AN ACHIEVEMENT: Lt. Digna Abello of the Miami Beach Fire Department.

BY CRYSTAL CHEW
cchew@MiamiHerald.com

Sitting at the Miami Beach City Commission meeting on a recent Wednesday, Lt. Digna Abello waited alongside colleagues to be recognized for their recent promotions.

Abello, who was announced last, was promoted to the chief of training and support services for the Miami Beach Fire Department. She is the first female firefighter to reach the rank of division chief in the city's

history.

"Today is a special day because women have to work twice as hard," Commissioner Deede Weithorn said.

Abello, 32, who has been with the department for more than nine years, does not see it that way.

"I don't really think it's that much of a difference," Abello said. "I work with a great group of men and women that don't look at it as gender-based."

Miami Beach Fire Chief

Virgil Fernandez recognized Abello's commitment almost immediately.

"Very early on I observed her tenacity and dedication," he said.

Fernandez joined the Beach fire department in February. When he assessed the department, he recognized that training needed special attention, and called for someone well-versed in the latest trends, equipment and technology.

Some of Abello's new job duties include being in

charge of training for the department's 192 firefighters, recruiting and training new firefighters, meeting accreditation standards and adhering to the requirements of federal agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration and Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

"The major advancements in the fire service has come in training and technology," Fernandez said. "I wanted a strong leader that is well respected by the fire

department."

For Fernandez, Abello met all of the requirements for her new post. And while he did not take into account her gender, he thinks it's worth mentioning.

"It has been a male-dominated profession," Fernandez said. "To be able to exceed and to break down the barriers, perform at a level where you are just as good as the men you are working with and be fully capable of holding these positions are definitely worth noting."

KENDALL

Baptist's Day of Smiles helps disfigured youths

BY CRYSTAL CHEW
cchew@MiamiHerald.com

When Romana Akhter was just a few days old, she developed a hemangioma, a buildup of blood vessels in the skin. It quickly spread, leaving disfigurements on her face, particularly her right side.

Now 19 and in her first year at Miami Dade College, Akhter is on her way to a new look, thanks to Baptist Children's Hospital's 13th Annual Day of Smiles. Four surgeons, with the assistance of nurses, planned to perform corrective facial surgeries on six youths Saturday at the hospital, which donates its facilities for the procedures.

"I never used to talk to anyone," said Akhter. "I thought I would have to deal with this for the rest of my life."

Because of her family's financial strains, Akhter didn't think her family could afford to pay for the corrective surgery. Saturday's surgery was free.

"It is very difficult for children to go through life

like this," said Randy Lee, Baptist's chief operating officer.

The surgeons planned to correct such issues as cleft palates, cleft lips, scars, tumors, burns, ear deformities, port wine birthmarks and congenital hand deformities. The doctors and nurses also volunteer their time to perform the procedures.

"They know it's a good cause and what it means for those kids," Lee said.

The hospital sends letters to schools and clinics seeking patient referrals.

"I really enjoy this type of surgery," said Dr. Joel Levin, chief of plastic surgery and the person behind the event. "It's immediate gratification because we see the results right away."

Levin had been a trauma surgeon during the Vietnam War, which inspired him to volunteer with Operation Smile, an international charity that corrects cleft palates and other facial deformities for children around the world. Levin established Day of Smiles in 2001.



SURGERY PREP: Baptist Hospital plastic surgeon Joshua Lampert marks the area where he will perform cleft palate and lip surgery on Omar Cobas, 16, during last year's annual Day of Smiles at the hospital.