A SALUTE TO ADDISON COUNTY AND BRANDON

FIREFIGHTERS

Addison Independent, September 1, 2022

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JUGGLING FIREFIGHTING AND SCHOOL
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Firefighters work harder with fewer members

BY KATIE FUTTERMAN

It’s an extremely rewarding opportunity. We don’t get paid to do it, but the benefits far exceed anything you could get paid for. The chance to help out your neighbors in a time of need is a pretty rewarding feeling.
— Bridport Captain Cory Pratt

A s the number of hours that people have to volunteer dwindle in small towns across the county, fire departments continue to struggle to maintain an adequate number of dedicated helpers. They have worked extra hard to recruit new members, retain existing ones and foster a familial community within the department.

Bristol Fire Chief Brett LaRose recalls a time where the entire department was Bristol natives and there was a waitlist to get on the department. Now, a third of the roster is made up of people who did not grow up in Bristol, and there is certainly no cap on members.

Demographic changes in these communities have had an immense impact on Addison County fire departments. The history of many of these small towns is agricultural. Thus, departments were filled with local members, many of them sons of farmers in the area and farmers themselves.

And places like Brandon have fewer volunteers for organizations like the fire department and rescue squad because the loss of manufacturing jobs, such as at Vermont Tubbs and Nexus, has led a lot of people to move away, according to Brandon Area Rescue Squad Chief Andy Jackson. Moreover, many qualified volunteers move on to paid EMT services, he added.

And, as the agricultural sector shrinks, many people have begun to travel further distances for work, which leaves very few people for calls during the day. Bridport Volunteer Fire Department Captain Cory Pratt said the last thing a person with a long commute wants to do when they get home is go out again to volunteer. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped a little bit in this regard, with more people working locally, and thus ready to go during daytime emergencies. There are also some members of the department that are retired, or work night shifts.

Still, because fire departments are largely volunteer organizations, chiefs recognize that families and full-time employment should be members’ priorities. The goal, for LaRose at least, is for the department to be a person’s third or fourth priority.

“I will honestly say that I am recruiting every day. And if it wasn’t for that, or if I wasn’t involved, I could totally see Bridport being in the same kind of situation,” he said.

Heavy recruitment has helped Bridport become somewhat of an outlier in the story of struggling numbers at area fire departments. It has about 34 members, which actually exceeds the statute of 30, leading Bridport to have to transfer some active members into life members to make room for new members.

In fact, it’s never too early for Pratt to start recruiting. The BVFD tries to involve the community and elementary school through open houses. Pratt hopes that he can ingrain in young kids how cool it is to serve with the fire department, so they remember later on when they are old enough to join.

LaRose described the six-part recruitment process for his fire department. He invites the potential member to come to an informational meeting with him, and to bring their spouse or a family member, so they understand the commitment, too. LaRose then facilitates an interview with the two assistant chiefs, town administrator and a representative from the selectboard. He does a background check and firefighters need to do a medical evaluation. LaRose can then make a recommendation to the selectboard, who ultimately approves the person.

FIREFIGHTER TRAINING

The training for firefighters cannot be overlooked. For first year volunteers, the training is around 250 hours. Essentially, the department has to ask new members to give up their time for the entire day.

“With any volunteer organization, numbers are just that. They’re just numbers. What level of participation, involvement you get from your personnel is different and it’s varying between organizations,” said LaRose, who encounters a similar problem, despite having 31 on Bristol’s roster.

All the while, call volume has tripled since LaRose joined Bridport Fire Department, he added, more than 25 years ago, going from 50 to 60 a year to 160. For instance, they respond to an average of 30 motor vehicle crashes a year in Bristol alone. Putting out fires is actually the least of what the department does today, according to LaRose. Building code improvements, public fire education in schools and other preventative aspects have helped reduce the number of fires. The department responds to false alarms, smoke detectors and residential alarms. What this means, however, is that for some of these tasks, a person might decide not to go. A lack of schedules, which is one of the benefits, allows the person to choose.

Cromwell Fire Captain Raph Worrick recalls smaller calls when only two people show up, in which he was grateful that the call ended up being not too demanding. A two-person team could not have tackled a larger problem.

Pratt owns Pratt’s Store in Bridport, and he uses it as an opportunity to recruit people who come into the fire department.

“For the department to have to transfer some active members into life members to make room for new members.

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Addison Independent | FIREFIGHTERS | Thursday, Sept. 1, 2022 — PAGE 11

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We salute all Addison County Firefighters!

Thank you for protecting our roosts!
Student takes time from class to fight fires

A J Rossbach, a Middlebury College student from Seattle, is breaking boundaries locally and nationwide as a volunteer at the Middlebury Fire Department.

MFD is made up of 35 committed community members. Included in that cluster are five students a year who make up the college’s student volunteer portion of the group.

These students are on call 24/7 for the entire academic year, working alongside the 30 other volunteers at the stations in town.

Rossbach, a rising senior at Middlebury College, has been a member of MFD since 2021, but has been a part of the firefighting world for much longer than that. She started her training as a fire-protector four years ago in her home across the country in Seattle at a program called Camp Blaze, a fire camp for young women.

“Camp Blaze is an independent, non-profit program that is a week long and usually takes place at the end of July. The program is funded by major fire departments along the west coast. Rossbach said Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles fire departments in accordance with other departments in their metro areas are among the main large funders of the program.

“There are a ton of people from all these departments, including instructors and campers from a total of 10 different states here,” Rossbach said over the phone from Washington state. “And it’s all women — there are about 100 women volunteering, and there are 24 young girls who are learning about fire service.”

After participating in Camp Blaze, Rossbach joined the cadet program with her local fire department at the Seattle Fire Department. She was a part of their team until the fall of 2021, when she began working with the Middlebury Fire Department.

RECRUITMENT AND COMMITMENT
MFD and Middlebury College’s relationship began in 1988 when Dillon Dimick, a Middlebury freshman at the time, joined the department as a probationary firefighter. Since then, other students have volunteered at the MFD, including Rossbach.

When asked about the process of joining the local fire department, Rossbach said that recruitment, for her, “wasn’t as hard as I thought,” because she’d gone through it twice before back home on the west coast.

“The Middlebury Fire Department is just such a good community,” she said. “The fire department has a really good relationship with the college, and I felt welcomed immediately. It’s a great group of people, they feel like my second family.”

But it’s not always comforting and bubbly. In addition to being on call at all times, the student volunteers are enrolled students at the college, which makes the tasks that come with being a firefighter no small feat.

“We have pages, and the pages are on us 24/7. If we get a call, and we can go, we go. If we can’t, we don’t.”

Rossbach spoke of a sort of mutual understanding between student volunteers and professors back at school who are removed from the fire department but are equally as considerate when it comes to academic leniency.

“There’s a lot of respect — if a page sounds like an important call, I might leave class. But if it’s an important class, if it’s something that I can’t miss, I won’t leave class. I think we understand each other,” she said. “My professors have been really understanding about tardiness in class: maybe I’ll have to leave 10 minutes early, or maybe I’ll be at a fire scene for eight hours. And then, if need be, they’re more lenient with deadlines and exams.”

Rossbach was recruited in the fall of 2021 and served throughout this past school year. She and the four other student volunteers enrolled in the mandatory Firefighter One certification course, which (See Student, Page 15)
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Recruiting

(Continued from Page 7)

some of their nights and weekends, all while many of them are raising a family and working full time.

Once full members of the department, the training does not stop. In Bristol, team members have to train for 36 hours per year, and 15% attendance is required at all dispatched calls for service.

Training is another area where Pratt prevails. He works hard to turn the difficult work into a fun experience.

“Any job you do has non-favorable things that people don’t want to do, but if you lump them together with things that people can have fun with, it makes it a little bit better,” he said.

Pratt takes training of the skills the members need and evolves it into something fun. For instance, if firefighters need to practice putting on airpacks, he might make an obstacle course with small openings and members carrying objects. The department also had ice water training, in which 20 members came in on a day below zero degrees Fahrenheit, just to experience getting into frigid water. Pratt also organizes water polo or water games to practice putting hose lines.

“We’re a good group that likes to be together,” Pratt said.

Though he did not share fun games like Pratt, LaRose also makes a conscious effort to make Bristol’s department a welcoming space. LaRose’s work as a supervisor outside of the department helps him have a firm grasp on leadership.

He uses democratic leadership at the department to ensure that everyone is involved.

WORKING TOGETHER

With so many small departments, mutual aid is not only common, but also necessary. In Cornwall, any call that sounds like it will be something major, like a big structure fire, is always supported by mutual aid, according to Worrick. Even if everyone from the primary department shows up, one set of firefighters sometimes just does not have the resources to handle big calls.

When the New Haven Fire Department was called to an apartment house on Route 7 in New Haven Junction last month, firefighters from six other towns also came to help battle the blaze.

LaRose has built automatic mutual aid protocols in his department’s operation. He broke the town into four geographical zones, so depending where an emergency call comes from, different people and materials respond. When a certain alarm goes on confirming a working fire, smoke in the building or something of a similar severity, it automatically triggers a second alarm for neighboring departments.

The automatic aspect helps a fire response move faster.

“We try to take the guessing out of it,” he said.

WHY DO IT

The most rewarding aspect for these firefighting departments is community — the community they build with each other, as well as the ability to give back to the broader neighborhood, town and county community.

“For me, it’s also just a way to meet people in town that I wouldn’t meet otherwise, just because I wouldn’t necessarily intersect with them through work or my own social circle, so I think it’s a good equalizer for the town in the sense that there’s all kinds of people on the department, and that gives us a good perspective on the needs of the town in a way that I’m sure a professional department doesn’t necessarily have,” said Worrick.

“It’s an extremely rewarding opportunity. We don’t get paid to do it, but the benefits far exceed anything you could get paid for. The chance to help out your neighbors in a time of need is a pretty rewarding feeling, and it makes it worth all the blood, sweat and tears,” said Pratt. “We’re a nice little family out here in the country. Everybody kinda knows each other anyways, so that makes our bond easier. Once people get the opportunity to do something for their community, many of them want to do it again.”

Despite struggles, fire departments have continued to work hard to ensure that they protect their community. Make sure to thank them next time you see them!

Editor’s note: Steven Jupiter of the Brandon Reporter contributed to this story.

FIRST RESPONDERS’ TRUCKS line West Shore Drive in Salisbury on Feb. 21 as firefighters from nine departments, including from as far away as New Haven, Bristol and Pittsford, came to extinguish a blaze at a prominent old home known as “Tarkey’s.”

SINCE AREA FIRE departments often can’t count on enough volunteers to show up at a truly large structure fire, mutual aid among county departments is essential. For example, firefighters from seven departments — New Haven, Vergennes, Addison, Ferrisburgh, Weybridge, Bristol and Middlebury — responded to this major apartment building fire on Route 7 in New Haven Junction last month.

Photo courtesy of Mark Bouvier
teaches the necessary skills of being an interior firefighter, the type of firefighter who enters buildings. The course is rigorous, spanning about 200 hours, beginning in September and ending in May.

“We have to go through a 200-hour Firefighter One class, which doesn’t count towards any Middlebury credits. We’re taking that on top of everything else,” she said. “That’s every Thursday for the whole school year. That’s the main hard part, I’d say. The bi-monthly trainings and bi-weekly trainings feel quite manageable though.”

Rossbach has had an exceptional experience with the MFD and credits her relationships with the non-student firefighters for that.

“The officers and all of the firefighters are so friendly. They always ask how school is going and how homework is going. They know that you’re in Middlebury for school, and that’s your priority. Their understanding makes it a lot easier too,” she said.

To learn more about Camp Blaze, visit their website, campblazefirecamp.org. To learn more about MFD’s student volunteering program with Middlebury College, head online to middleburyfiredept.org/apply-now.

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE RISING senior A.J. Rossbach, shown at a firefighter training school in Washington called Camp Blaze, volunteers with the Middlebury Fire Department and juggles classes with fire calls.

ADDISON COUNTY — The Addison County Firefighters Association’s Scholarship Committee this past spring announced that Karissa Livingston and Henry Carpenter were chosen to receive scholarships awarded to Addison County students. The scholarships are in the amount of $1,000 each. The announcement was made at the ACFA quarterly meeting held in Bristol on April 13.

Karissa is the daughter of Philip and Dawn-Marie Livingston of New Haven. Karissa, a 2021 graduate of Mount Abraham Union High School, is attending Plymouth State University in Plymouth, N.H., seeking a degree in Business and Finance. Several members of Karissa’s family are members of the New Haven Volunteer Fire Department, including her dad, who is a line captain.

Henry is the son of Jeff Carpenter and Corinna Noelke of Middlebury. A 2022 graduate of Middlebury Union High School, Henry will attend Colgate College in Hamilton, N.Y., seeking a degree in Economics and Math. Henry’s dad, Jeff, is a 19-year member of the Middlebury Fire Department and is a captain. Both Henry and his sister, Audrey, are cadets in the department.

The Ray E. Davison Scholarship fund was established in 1992. The Addison County Firefighters Association is pleased and proud to be assisting families of Addison County Firefighters with their college education.
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Thank you

Thank you to all the Salisbury Fire Department volunteers & EMTs and all the other Addison County firefighters.

The Salisbury Selectboard along with all the citizens of Salisbury are thankful for your service!

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