



Celebrating 50 years

THE UNIVERSITY FIRE DEPARTMENT, FORMED IN 1964,
HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF FIREFIGHTERS

By Sam Bishop

The first “barbecue” held at the Cutler Apartment Complex wasn’t planned — and it got completely out of control, as Doug Schrage recalls.

Schrage, now the University Fire Department chief, was a student firefighter in 1983 when the partially finished apartments burned.

Schrage was in the station when the call came reporting a fire in the complex, located several hundred yards up Yukon Drive and behind the Moore-Bartlett-Skarland dorms.

“As soon as we opened the garage doors here, we could see it in the sky,” Schrage said. The apartments, still under construction, had exposed wood framing and plywood. The fire spread quickly.

“They burned to the ground. They had to start over,” Schrage said.

The fire was just one of the many events that has given Schrage and hundreds of other students real-life, on-the-job training during the past 50 years. Department alumni celebrated the 50th anniversary with a reunion in July that drew more than 130 former student firefighters from across the nation.

Schrage, whose career brought him to the deputy chief’s position in Anchorage before he returned to UAF in 2010, responded to his first car crash and performed his first CPR as a student firefighter.

The memories don’t all involve trauma, though.

One winter, Schrage said, student groups were given huge snow mounds to sculpt. “We were going to make ours into a big fire hydrant, but, before it was completed, the dean of students ordered us to knock it down,” Schrage said.

Apparently, Dean of Students Dick Stenard saw something else in the team’s roughed-out sculpture.

“He thought we were building a 10-foot phallus,” Schrage said. Stenard relented after the firefighters clarified the source of their artistic inspiration.

Today, the number of student firefighters has doubled from Schrage’s time in the program, but the basic model has not changed. As of June, the department had 42 student firefighters as well as 11 professional staff. The students must complete a certification class to become eligible for the job. Once hired, they work at the station (or remain on call nearby, such as in classes) an average of 56 hours

“You’ve got to be able to hack it.”

per week as full-time university employees. Fifteen students actually bunk in the station.

During orientation, Schrage said, an instructor draws a triangle with corners labeled “work,” “school” and “social life.” Pick two, the instructor says.

“No, you don’t get Christmas off, but that’s part of the career. You’ve got to be able to hack it,” said Joy Beth Cottle, a student firefighter from 2001 to 2003 and now a captain at the Fairbanks Fire Department.

Cottle said the training can’t be matched.

“I got to make a lot of mistakes so I didn’t have to do them when I got hired in my career job,” she said. The department’s professional staff, who help catch and correct those mistakes, are top-notch, she said.

By giving her confidence, Cottle said, the university’s program helped her overcome the challenges she faced as a woman.

“You are incompetent until proven competent as a woman. It doesn’t change,” she said. “I had the confidence, and that is really where a lot of women struggle, to have the confidence to put themselves out there.”

Given their employability, most students stay for three years, by which time they have their associate degrees and paramedic certifications.

“The advantage that the students have coming out of the program is just huge,” said Cottle, who was the first female firefighter hired by the City of Fairbanks’ department.

The university department, formed in 1964, originally served only the campus. Since 1977, the university has contracted its services to the University Fire Service Area, a volunteer commission-led arm of the

Fairbanks North Star Borough, to provide fire and emergency service to the campus and a surrounding area with about 22,000 residents. The university covers roughly a third of the cost, while the service area pays the rest from taxes on private property within its boundaries.

Schrage said he appreciates that the university continues to support the student-firefighter model. He recognizes the risk involved in trusting 18-year-olds with 60,000-pound, \$1.5 million tanker trucks. “They’re basically still learning to drive a car,” he said of the new students.

But the model, now 50 years in, has proven itself.

Schrage said he tells students that “if they have people your age flying fighter jets in the Navy, we can teach you to drive a fire truck safely.”

On the web: www.uaf.edu/fire/50th-reunion/

