

North Forty News

and archives of the Fossil Creek Current
The community newspaper for northern Larimer County, Colorado

April 2010

Mountain districts picking women for fire chiefs

By Stephen Clearheart Johnson
North Forty News

Volunteer fire departments at Crystal Lakes and Livermore recently selected women to serve as their new fire chiefs.

These are not historic firsts, but come in the wake of a five-year term recently completed by Bette Blinde of the Poudre Canyon Fire Protection District.

"There are a lot of opportunities for women in firefighting, especially volunteer work," Blinde noted.

She also cautioned that becoming chief means "a large learning curve." The chiefs not only fight fires, but also supervise training, recruiting, fund-raising and a constant flow of paperwork for such things as grants. They also document improvements to obtain lower ISO ratings to reduce insurance costs in their areas.

Since the 1980s, women have increasingly filled the ranks of these volunteer departments. Today, they make up 40 to 50 percent of the force. At Red Feather Lakes, women make up over half of the certified firefighter roster. Women are increasingly coming to dominate the emergency medical technician ranks.

Crystal Lakes named Marian Kelly fire chief in October. Kelly, the youngest person in the department, served as assistant chief for four years. She now leads 32 volunteers protecting some 1,600 mountain parcels, with almost half having structures. Her biggest challenge, she said, is that the population soars from 250 residents in winter to 5,000 residents, guests and visitors in summer. Handling this surge, Kelly said, makes "recruiting an ongoing problem."

Kelly echoes a common sentiment among volunteers, explaining that when she moved to the mountains, "I knew people would help me, and I wanted to help them."

The Livermore Fire Protection District recently swore in Deb Payne as fire chief. Deb has four years of experience with the group and 10 years in other Colorado districts. She is a certified structural firefighter and EMT.

Livermore's two stations cover more than 600 square miles with some 900 full-time residents.

Additionally, they provide emergency medical services along Highway 287 to the Wyoming border, especially the dangerous winter stretches near Virginia Dale.

"Women are successful in firefighting because it requires so much multitasking, and women are born multitaskers," Payne said and added, "Technology is replacing brute strength, but will never replace it completely."

Payne acknowledged the steep learning curve, noting that in the first week she spent some 20 hours in meetings over such items as grants, policy issues, burn permits and new construction. Being chief, she said, "is very time-consuming."

Her district is currently recruiting for a logistics department staffed with non-firefighting members for such tasks as mechanical upkeep, traffic control at accident sites, grant writing, tender driving and more.

Interested volunteers, male or female, may visit the web sites for more information. Crystal Lakes can be found at clvfd.org while Livermore's site is livermorefire.com.