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Rising to the challenge

Number of female firefighters increases in county

By ADAM WATSON

Daily News Staff Writer



Mapleton Volunteer Fire Department firefighters, from the left, Amy Miles, Cierra Bair and Kristin Miles are three of six females in the department who took the essentials of firefighting class to answer calls. There are a number of female firefighters throughout the county who answer alarms for their respective fire companies and will participate in the upcoming 67th Annual Huntingdon County Firemen's convention in coming days.
Photo by ADAM WATSON

Next week, members of the Huntingdon County Firemen's Association will be convening for the group's 67th annual firefighters convention.

Once a male dominated profession, there has been an increase in the number of female firefighters in both the paid and volunteer firefighting genre that has many taking notice. For many years, several Huntingdon County fire companies had ladies auxiliary units that often served as the backbone of the companies and raised funds to allow firefighters in their respective companies to not only improve and renovate their stations, but to purchase life-saving equipment used on emergency calls.

When asked about the number of female firefighters statewide, Pennsylvania State Fire Commissioner Ed Mann told *The Daily News* that statistics such as these are not tracked. Personally, Mann said he feels there has been an increase in the number of females who have become active with the fire service and bases this on his travels across the state and the number of females who have become instructors in the last couple of years.

The Daily News decided to make some inquiries with some female firefighters throughout the county and asked them about some of the challenges they face and why some of them decided to become involved. It was found that carrying on family traditions in the fire service holds true not only for many male firefighters in the county, but for the gals as well.

During a recent Mapleton Borough meeting, fire chief Mike Corbin announced three female members of his department recently took and passed the essentials of firefighting class to be eligible to answer emergency calls for the company. Corbin stated the three are not the only female members of his department.

Mapleton female firefighter Amy (Coder) Miles was the first female firefighter in the department, joining in 1981. She served as Mapleton Fire Queen in 1980.

Miles recalled she took a basic firefighting course following joining the department. She was one of three females, including daughter Kristin and Cierra Bair to recently complete the essentials of firefighting modules course taught by female firefighter instructors Heidi O'Neal of Saxton and Tammy Fagan of Huntingdon.

Other Mapleton female firefighters include Harley Bilger and Tina and Terri Ann Warner. Tina Werner and Bilger, according to Corbin, are both operators of the company's smaller vehicles and Warner is working on becoming an engine operator.



As for challenges as female firefighters, Amy Miles feels things are not as bad as they were when she joined the fire department. There were many at the time opposed to females being allowed to be firefighters.

"We come from a good and accepting volunteer fire department. We work well with them and they work well with us," she said.

Miles agreed that time management is definitely an issue. Between trying to hold down a job and keeping up with family responsibilities and obligations, participating in continual and in-house training is often difficult.

Fire department member Brenda Coder, who serves as department treasurer and has been a member of the company for 21 years, said it is all a balancing act. Although she is not a female firefighter, Coder assists the fire department during calls by providing things responders need such as food and

drinks, etc.

Miles joined the fire department because of tradition. She agreed that many firefighters join their hometown volunteer fire companies because it is a generational thing.

Kristin Miles said a lot of young people won't get involved in fire companies if their family is not involved.

"It's often a scary thing for some as well as being hard to do while in high school or college when you are required to juggle so many things," Kristin Miles said.

For many young people whose parents are involved in a fire company, Amy Miles said when they see them working within their community helping others, it often rubs off and they do the same things. Bair said it is something young people cannot be forced, but must want to do.

Kristin Miles joined the fire department as a junior at age 14. She will turn 18 in the fall, at which time she will be able to become a senior member of the fire department. Bair joined the Trough Creek Valley Fire Co. at age 14 and joined Mapleton last month.

It was stated that Terri Ann Warner just turned 18 years old and will be able to complete her essentials class. Participants must be at least 18 since the fourth module involves live structural burn training.

Although she took the basic firefighting course many years ago, Amy Miles stated the essentials class is good training to take. The Mileses took their training at Mill Creek, while Bair took hers at Trough Creek.

The trio said they really see no difference with female instructors compared to male instructors since they have no problem working with men. They stated in all the classes they took, women in the class were expected to do the same things as the men.

"I have two sons, the 'girls' in our department are the closest I have gotten to daughters," stated Corbin proudly.

Huntingdon Regional Fire and Rescue (HRFR) firefighter Phallen Magill stated she has been a member of the fire service for nine years, having joined the former McConnellstown Volunteer Fire Co. in 2004, although her grandfather has been a member of the former Huntingdon Fire Department for over 50 years.

Like many other firefighters, Magill has taken the essentials of firefighting modules, is a Firefighter I, emergency medical technician (EMT) and is trained in hazardous materials operations and vehicle rescue. She currently serves as Emergency Medical Services (EMS) captain and department secretary.

Magill said there are many challenges females face within the fire service. There is still a group that feels females have no place in the fire service and it is a male dominated industry (industry wide, not just Huntingdon County). She said she is fortunate to have started out in a company that believes everyone deserves an equal chance to prove themselves.

"I have been welcomed from the start and have been encouraged to take as much training as possible. My biggest challenge is my size. It can be difficult to wear full turn out gear and breathing apparatus and carry necessary equipment when it weighs almost as much as I do, although my department has always ensured I have the best available gear to ensure my ability to function in a safe and effective manner," she said.

She said it is also difficult being a new mother and trying to juggle the demands of motherhood and call response while also completing her administrative obligations as well. With her husband, who is a chief officer, Magill said they take turns answering calls, but she went from making every call to only making about one a month recently.

Magill said she gets a lot of attention from children, especially during fire prevention week. She said it's nice to be able to show kids that you can do whatever you want to do if you work hard despite gender.

At the Saxton Volunteer Fire Co., there are six female firefighters. Female firefighter and chief officer Heidi O'Neal is likely one of the first female firefighters in the company.

O'Neal began her career in the fire service first as both Saxton and Huntingdon County Fire Queen in 1985. She joined the Saxton Fire Co. in 1993 and started fighting fire six years later in 1999.

Following the turn of a new century, O'Neal advanced to become a Firefighter I in 2001 followed by a Firefighter II in 2003. She became a fire officer and fire instructor I both in 2005, was named Saxton Firefighter of the Year and became an incident safety officer in 2006 and a state suppression instructor and fire instructor II in 2007.

She received state Department of Health certification in basic vehicle rescue (BVR) in 2008 as well as being named Huntingdon County Firefighter of the Year. She also received certification as a general rescue technician and joined the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team formed at Saxton that year.

In 2011, O'Neal became certified in special vehicle rescue and became a structural collapse I and II technician. In 2012, she became a Pennsylvania State Fire Academy (PSFA) adjunct instructor and USAR Company 5 team leader.

When she joined the Saxton Fire Co., O'Neal said she didn't want any special treatment, but just wanted to fit in.

"I wanted to be just one of the guys and have others be happy and confident that I was sitting on the apparatus next to them. I trained and learned as much as I could to be the best I could be," she said.

O'Neal feels we all have strengths and weaknesses.

"I have been very fortunate that my chief, Mark Taylor, and other officers at Saxton have done just that. The support I have received early in my career came from many (too numerous to mention), and has helped me reach the goals that I have achieved," added O'Neal.

"Joining the Saxton Fire Co. and becoming a state suppression instructor has been two of the most rewarding things that I have done in my life. One of the people who influenced and helped me tremendously was Tom Arnold," she said.

O'Neal has served as a lieutenant, captain and currently hold the rank of assistant fire chief at Saxton. She also serves as an EMT and fire company trustee.

Shade Gap fire chief Rick McMullen reported his company has four active female firefighters. Shannon (Wright) Fegan is one of these.

Wright told *The Daily News* she was born into the fire service, being the fourth generation of Wrights in the Trough Creek Valley Volunteer Fire Co. Fegan had the great fortune of seeing many women actively involved in the fire company, including her grandmother who was an EMT and her mother, Sue, who was both an EMT and firefighter.

"As a child, I was always so proud to see the 'all women' team from Trough Creek Valley participate at convention. I joined at age 16, the youngest we were allowed to then," she said.

She went on to complete her EMT and obtained essentials of firefighting certification before she graduated from the Southern Huntingdon County High School.

Fegan said one of her fondest memories was with her dad, Derek Wright, right after she finished essentials instruction. At 18, she was finally a senior firefighter and approved for interior attack.

Over the course of several years, Fegan said she has become certified as a basic vehicle rescue and hazardous materials technician. Presently, she volunteers with the Huntingdon County Emergency Management Agency as well.

Her fire service background has also led her to join the Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT PA-1) out of Pittsburgh to help serve in national disasters.

Fegan said one of the biggest challenges as a woman in the fire service is proving you can do the job and gaining the trust of your brother firefighters. Moving from the Trough Creek Fire Co. to the Shade Gap Fire Co. she said was a little bit of an adjustment because Trough Creek had a lot of female firefighters and Shade Gap, at the time, had two.

"I was fortunate to have taken classes at Shade Gap before I moved there. Acceptance was a little easier than it may have been in other areas," added Fegan.

Fegan said her biggest challenge as a female firefighter is balancing the demands of motherhood with her desire to help.

Orbisonia-Rockhill Fire Co. president and firefighter Carla Panosetti stated there are four female firefighters at her station. Panosetti and Tammy Gilliland are trained at the interior level and two others are trained for the exterior level.

Panosetti also has participated in and is certified as an exterior firefighter with live burn training, is a vehicle rescue technician, medical first responder and is a hazardous material and hazardous material radiological technician. She is also trained in water rescue, basic rope and rigging and has trained to (NIMS) 400 level.

"I have been around the fire service ever since I was young. I was Three Springs fire queen many moons ago," she said.

Robertsdale, Wood & Broad Top (RW&BT) firefighter Bethany Hess stated she first joined the Saxton Volunteer Fire Co. in 2002 and became an EMT in 2004. Hess is currently a certified Firefighter II and state certified in basic vehicle rescue and is rope rescue 4 certified.

She is a hazardous material technician. She is also certified in pump operations, EVOG, structural burn and diving.

"I joined the fire company because of friends. I also met my husband, Randy, in the fire service and my son, David, is following in our footsteps," she said.

Hess said she believes either male or female, if one can pull their own weight and is willing to help people in the community, there should be no issues. She also believes females have to prove themselves long before being accepted by a lot of people in the fire service while there are others who welcome them and will "have their back" just like everyone else.

Six Mile Run fire chief Tim Hinish stated his department has four female firefighters in the ranks there. In neighboring Fulton County, Hustontown fire chief Darius Deshong said there are also four female firefighters in his company.

Adam can be reached at dnews@huntingdondailynews.com.

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