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“Norfolk Reserve Firefighters”



City of Norfolk Library administrator Mike Caldararo is proof that a librarian isn't a shrinking violet. Caldararo recently passed a series of strenuous tests to become a member of the Norfolk Reserve Firefighters.

“I've wanted to be involved in the Reserve Firefighters since working as an intern at the city last year. The Norfolk firefighters are a great group,” Caldararo said.

Twelve people who wanted to be members of the Norfolk reserve firefighters went through various exercises this month that tested their strength, speed and aptitude for

firefighting. At one point recruits crawled through a pitch black tunnel that would show whether they were claustrophobic or not. A peek over the edge of the roof from the top of the five story fire training center lets the recruit know whether he or she is afraid of heights.

“It's not for everyone. This gives them a good idea of some of things they'll encounter in a fire situation,” said Doug Dekker, a shift commander of the Norfolk Fire Department, who supervised the recruiting maneuvers.

Besides feeling their way through a dark crawl space, the recruits also have to drag a 175 pound dummy, carry weights through an obstacle course, drag a water filled fire hose and use a sledge hammer to move a weight on a drag sled.

“A fire emergency may require ten minutes of intense activity. Firefighters need to train for that. Recruits have to go through these tests without stopping to show they can hold up if called to a fire,” Dekker said.

This was a special group for Dekker because one recruit was his youngest son, Michael, who had just graduated from Norfolk Senior High School the weekend before. Dekker's oldest son was also a reserve prior to being hired as a career firefighter in Omaha.

“I was very pleased with how he did. I was especially proud with the way he encouraged everyone else as they went through the drills,” Dekker said.

Another proud dad was 20 year veteran reserve firefighter Bill Greenough. His 21-year-old son, Trevor, also was in the group of potential reserve firefighters. His son, Joe, was a reserve firefighter and now is a member of the Norfolk Police Department.

Trevor has been running, swimming, and biking to prepare himself for the rigorous firefighter tests.

"It's always been a dream of mine. My dad's my role model. Being a reserve firefighter is a tradition in our family and I want to follow in those footsteps. Being a firefighter and protecting people is the most meaningful thing you can do," Trevor said.

He said the hardest part of the test was pulling the dummy along a pre-marked path on the concrete.

Once the eleven new recruits have undergone basic firefighting training, there will be 34 reserve firefighters available to come to the aid of the Norfolk Fire Department. These reserves each have day jobs but carry pagers that alert them to fires in the Norfolk area. Their employers have agreed to let them leave work if need be to help with a fire.

The reserve firefighters are required to attend training twice a month to learn to drive the fire trucks, operate the fire hoses and do everything the full-time firefighters do. They can either come in for a 9 am to noon session or an evening 7-10 pm session.

Rick Tomjack works at Covidien in Norfolk and, as a reserve firefighter, helped fight fires at Kings' Ballroom, MidCity Stereo, and, more recently, at Protient.

"We're trained to handle anything and everything at a fire. We train and train and train and hope that nothing happens but if it does (our response) is just second nature," Tomjack said.

He helped evacuate people out of the area near the Protient plant fire in December, 2009, and was on hand for backup measures when a team of firefighters (which included a reserve firefighter) walked to the fire with hoses spraying to turn off the tank's propane valves. Besides the training provided by the Norfolk fire officials, Tomjack has also taken fire training courses through the Nebraska State Fire Training Division.

Dekker said that many of the current fulltime firefighters were once on the reserves.

"If fulltime firefighting is something you think you'd like to do, it's good to get onto the reserves to see what it's like. It's a good place to start," Dekker said.