

KeizerCommunity

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Slater retires from KFD after 22 years

By DEREK WILEY
Of the Keizertimes

After working 43 of the last 44 Keizer Fire District breakfasts, Dale Slater won't be there on Mother's Day this year, greeting guests at the door.

But do not be alarmed. He'll be back.

Slater, a volunteer at KFD since December of 1994, retired last month to spend time with his new grandchild, born March 30 in New York.

"I think we're going to be in New York for the Mother's Day breakfast but I will be coming back for those," Slater confirmed. "Just because I'm not an active volunteer, there are many former volunteers that come back to work those. If I can come and flip pancakes or work the desk or the door, they're happy to have the extra set of hands."

Inspired by the movie *Backdraft* and looking to make a career change, Slater moved from southern Oregon to the Willamette Valley to begin taking paramedic classes at Chemeketa Community College in Salem. After running into Deputy Fire Marshal Rod Conway, Slater decided to interview at KFD.

Slater remembers his first fire as a pumper operator. The call came in at 2 a.m. and as they turned down Cherry Avenue and on to Candlewood Drive, Slater saw a row of arborvitae engulfed in flames.

"You could see the light in the sky coming up Cherry

Avenue and you knew it was a real fire," Slater said. "(I was) terrified and excited at the same time. It was a lot of arborvitae and it burns hot so it took a 1,000 gallons of water to put it out."

Two more calls, both more than 10 years ago, immediately come to mind when Slater looks back at his 22-year career as a volunteer firefighter.

The first was a report of an overturned canoe in the Willamette River by Spongs Landing. KFD teamed up with Polk County Police to rescue a mom, dad and their young child.

The other was a hot air balloon crash in a field behind Dayspring Fellowship.

"We heard there's a balloon coming down really low on Sandra Lee (Way)," Slater said. "The bucket hit right between two houses and dragged on the empty field behind the church. Everybody was OK."

Keizer volunteer firefighters work either one 12 hour shift



KEIZERTIMES/Derek Wiley

As a volunteer firefighter in Keizer, Dale Slater has greeted guests at the door for 43 of the last 44 pancake breakfasts. He retired in March to spend more time with family.

during the week or 24 hours on the weekend every six days. For Slater, it didn't matter if his shift wended up on Christmas, New Year's Eve or any other holiday. He only ever asked off for his wife's birthday.

"It's a good clean hobby and it's a good way to give back to my community," Slater said. "Some people are Rotarians and some people are Elks and some people go to church or work at food banks. I gave my time at the fire station and utilized the education that I had. It was very rewarding. I know a lot of people in town and they know me."

Slater knows so many people in Keizer that he once responded to a three-car wreck on River Road where he knew all three drivers. When Slater left his post at the pancake breakfast, even for a few minutes, he was certain to hear about it.

"All I do is stand at the door just to control traffic and if I'm not there for five minutes, people complain, 'Where were you?'" Slater said. "Sadly, I've become known for being a door stop but it's fun. Mother's Day and Christmas breakfast,

it's about the kids. You teach the kids and have a little fun with them."

Technology has changed the job. Instead of flipping through an old paper map, the firefighters have apps on their smartphones with GPS. But firefighters are also much busier than they used to be.

"It's a harder job than it used to be and it's busier than when I started 22 years ago," Slater said. "Sometimes I'd be on a 24 hour

shift and not go on a single call, nobody called 911, now it's 19 or 20 a day. I was on shift on Jan. 1 of this year during the winter storm and we had 29 calls that day."

When Slater first started, KFD didn't have dorms for its volunteers either. That changed in February of 1997 with the new station.

"You can respond at home but most everyone stays at the station because it's just more

efficient," Slater said. "You don't have to wake up your spouse when the tone goes off at two o'clock in the morning, garage door opens and closes. You get there and aren't needed after all."

While serving as a volunteer firefighter, Slater worked in the food service industry at the old Porter's Pub in Keizer. He's now a technology project manager for the Department of Justice.

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