

Women make up less than 8 percent of firefighters

FIREFIGHTERS

continued from front page

a Tribal member and give back. It's very exciting and an awesome opportunity to serve the people who helped me in my development as a person."

Barry, 21, and fellow Tribal member Brandy Bishop, 39, finished fire academy one training recently and now only have to pass final exams. They're part of a fire station that is rare in the field, one with four women and two men, making it 66 percent female.

The other women in the department are firefighter/emergency medical technician Erika Alcantar and firefighter/paramedic Tammy Tigner, who also serves as the Tribe's training and volunteer coordinator. Bishop is the Tribe's emergency preparedness coordinator, while Alcantar and Barry are employed as COVID-19 contact tracers.

Nationally, women make up less than 8 percent of the country's firefighters, according to statistics from a 2018 study by the National Fire Protection Association. Comparatively, 13 percent of police officers are female, 21 percent of paramedics or emergency medical technicians are women and 20 percent of the U.S military is comprised of females.

The West Valley Fire District has 30 volunteer firefighters, of which five are female, and 25 paid firefighters, four of whom are female. The Tribe is in the process of taking over fire protection and emergency medical response in the Grand Ronde area from West Valley.

"I've been in the Emergency Management Department since it was brand new," Bishop says. "Since then, I've had lots of education and experiences. When I had the opportunity to develop the emergency medical services/fire side, I decided to jump in and try. This is all very new to me, but I'm thrilled to learn this and honored to be a part of it. I see the capability of the Tribe improving by adding fire to its services."

The two have been mentored in the often challenging process of becoming firefighters by Alcantar, 25, who graduated from Chemeketa Community College with a fire science degree and worked as a volunteer firefighter for the West Valley Fire District for three years. She also serves as an instructor at the volunteer fire academy in McMinnville and understands the challenges women in the fire service face, particularly how to successfully carry 75 pounds of gear during training and on the job.

"I really enjoy being an instructor and helping other women at the academy successfully get through the training," Alcantar says. "I enjoy helping make it a rewarding experience and seeing everyone come together."

Barry worked for the Tribe previously in the Education Department, but never forgot her goal of becoming a firefighter. During last

Tribal fire departments are uncommon

Tribally operated fire departments are not the norm in the United States.

The only statistics that are readily accessible are from the Department of the Interior's Wildland Fire Management program, which notes that 89 Tribes across Indian Country manage programs, and some units provide services to multiple Tribes. Nationwide, there are 574 federally recognized Tribes.

Oregon has nine recognized Tribes. Three of those – Grand Ronde, Warm Springs and Umatilla – have Tribally operated fire departments. The Burns Paiute Tribe is in the beginning stages of volunteer recruitment.

Umatilla has seven full-time employees and 25 volunteer firefighters. None of the career firefighters are female. Officials in Warm Springs could not be reached for comment.

The Grand Ronde Tribe will be responsible for fire and emergency medical response in the community by 2025. As early as December 2019, the Tribe expressed its desire to add fire to its list of sovereign nation public safety responsibilities. Under a transition plan, the Tribe's Emergency Man-

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"A Tribally controlled, equipped and staffed fire station centrally located in Grand Ronde is an effective and efficient means to provide an enhanced level of fire and emergency medical services to Tribal lands and promotes sovereignty," states the intergovernmental agreement with the West Valley Fire District.

The Grand Ronde Fire Station has been in operation since 2010, after the Tribe and West Valley Fire District signed their first intergovernmental agreement in July 2009 to build and operate it. The \$1 million station also has received hundreds of thousands of dollars annually from the Tribe to fund operations.

During the five-year transition, the Tribe will continue to fund personnel to staff the fire station while the Tribe and West Valley Fire District will work to recruit Grand Ronde Tribal members for full-time positions. The Tribe has already applied for several federal grants that would help purchase firefighting equipment and an ambulance for the local fire station.

– *By Danielle Harrison*

summer's catastrophic western Oregon wildfires, she took the first step in that direction.

"I spent the time as a wildland firefighter and that opened doors for me to be here," she says. "But in a way, working with Youth Education also prepared me because every day was different and you always needed to be ready."

The fire academy combines classroom learning with real-world experiences, such as controlled burns of empty buildings to teach critical lifesaving skills. Next month, Barry will begin her emergency medical technician certification while Bishop is in the process of earning her bachelor's degree in emergency management.

"It has been a challenge, but also an awesome experience," Barry says. "People really care and are out to teach us the best they can. The physical aspect can be challenging, but I also enjoy figuring it out and seeing what my abilities are. The fire academy was so fun."

She says that working at the Grand Ronde Fire Department during her training was invaluable when it comes to hands-on experience.

"I get one-on-one time with people here who have the time to teach me different techniques," Barry says. "That is something I have the opportunity to experience only because the fire department here is operated by the Tribe."

Adds Bishop, "We get a chance to really test out our skills and see what works."

Bishop says that although the fire academy training has been chal-

lenging, it's also enjoyable.

"The best part was really pushing myself and finding out what those limits are, with guidance and help," she says. "Firefighting was not something I imagined doing as a child, but knowing I can do it and I can keep setting new boundaries and keep growing is very gratifying."

"Something I took away from this experience was to really be able to put myself out there," Barry says. "Showing up when there are mostly all men (at the academy) can be scary. With the teammates we have here and a chief who believes in us 100 percent, I wasn't afraid of trying my hardest and if it didn't work out, at least I gave it 100 percent."

Alcantar, who was one of three women in a class of 50 at Chemeketa Community College, says she dealt with an outspoken male student who didn't feel women should be firefighters. She says working in Grand Ronde is a welcome change.

"It feels good to be able to push ourselves and have support from the guys who work with us," she says.

Adds Barry, "I feel completely safe in this workspace and supported by the men I work with. They have told me it is good to have another perspective. I come from a background of women who break barriers so this is another one."

Bishop says the strong female representation is a direct result of support from top Tribal leadership.

"Also, I've been brought up that your gender doesn't matter and have never felt like it was an issue here and I'm grateful for that," she says.

Even with supportive coworkers and supervisors, there are days that can seem overwhelming.

"We have all been through that where you didn't do as well as you wanted," Bishop says. "That's when you do a self-check to see what you have accomplished and that's where you get your strength to go on."

Barry faced difficulties during one of the academy's testing days, where as much as she pushed herself, she was unable to complete a drill in a set amount of time. That's when others urged her to slow down and take a step back.

"We came back together, I did the drill slower and more methodically, and I got it done right," she says. "Having support, I felt way more confident and knew it wasn't over and that I wasn't in over my head."

All of the women say they enjoy being role models for the next generation.

"I remember the first time I went on a car fire and a little kid said, 'Oh wow, that firefighter is a girl,'" Alcantar says. "I really enjoy being able to be there for the community and feel like I made a difference."

Barry says her niece is proud and likes to introduce her to others as "my auntie the firefighter."

"I grew up here my entire life and like being available to help," she says. "I'm proud of my hard work and want to show other Tribal kids that you can do anything you want. You just have to work hard for it. ... The Tribe has given me more opportunities than I can even imagine."

Bishop calls the process an "amazing journey."

"I am extremely proud of where this department has been and where it is going," she says. "We are here to see it flourish. It's also one area where we can leave the politics out and collaborate because it is all about safety and protecting our people."

Adds Barry, "I also want to be a part of uplifting other Tribal communities and extending a helping hand to them, which is really gratifying. We are also creating a much needed relationship with the outside community."

Fire Chief Steve Warden, who is also the Tribe's Emergency Operations coordinator and a longtime volunteer firefighter, appreciates having a female perspective in the department.

"The people I have on board here all have motivation, drive and a good attitude," he says. "Putting that aside, having these four women here really provides a positive role model for what we want to do here. We want people to know that if you meet the criteria, you are welcome here. I want somebody's daughter to look at her dad or mom and say, 'I want to become a firefighter.' If you put the Tribe first and the community first, you're going to have a long and fulfilling career. ... We are helping lay the foundation for a community fire department that people can take pride in. I see nothing but a bright future here." ■