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FIREFIGHTERS continued
from front page

in less than 45 minutes wearing a 45-pound pack.

Additionally, arduous duty firefighting positions require a thorough Department of Interior medical exam and qualification certificate before one can participate in the initial pack test, and then every three years afterward.

I’ve been a longtime runner and triathlete, so physical challenges are nothing new to me. However, I’d never tried to do anything remotely like the pack test and wasn’t sure if I could, as I tend to be a better runner than walker, and that’s without an additional 45 pounds!

Intrigued, I asked Puerini if he’d be willing to let me do the arduous test and write a story about the experience. He responded enthusiastically.

I told Smoke Signals Photojournalist/Assistant Editor Michelle Alaimo that I was doing the test and was surprised when she responded that she’d be willing to join me as a way to commemorate turning 50. Alaimo added that she’d always been interested in wildland firefighting and would like to take it a step further by earning her red card.

During this process, I learned that a wildland firefighter doesn’t necessarily have to be sent out to battle blazes in faraway places. They can also do summer Grand Ronde Reservation patrols on the weekends or holidays, as well as participate in prescribed burns.

Fast forward to February 2025: I began training once a week or so at the local gym, at first carrying 20 pounds. I couldn’t do more than 20 minutes on the treadmill at first. I slowly increased the weight and as the weather became nicer, took

Firefighters travel to help other areas

More than half the staff of the Tribe’s wildland firefighters are currently dispatched to help fight fires across the region, according to Fire Management and Protection Program Manager Andrew Puerini.

“The remaining 16 staff are primarily local militia and continue to be available for local fire support if the need arises,” he said. “There are five additional regular wildfire staff that have not yet completed the red card process. We will have 60 total red carded staff this season.”

An initial crew of 22 firefighters are working at the Pomas Fire in northwest Washington.

“The Pomas Fire is in extremely rugged terrain, with several communities threatened but progress is being made here,” Puerini said.

Eight firefighters are working at a fire in Roseburg, while “two

of our type-six engines with six total staff are providing support to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Southwest Region assisting Tribes with wildfire support in New Mexico,” Puerini said.

He added that another engine with three staff have recently returned from New Mexico and are resting.

He noted that, “We are thankfully far away from the recent active shooter situation that occurred in Idaho,” calling the ambush of firefighters near Coeur d’Alene in late June “an unexpected and scary nightmare.”

The motive for the attack remains unclear, as the gunman was found dead, having apparently taken his own life after shooting three firefighters responding to a fire he had started. Two of the firefighters were killed; a third remains hospitalized. ■

my workouts outdoors to the local track. I also focused on strength training for my core and legs to be able to withstand the extra weight.

By early June, I was up to the required 45 pounds but with a sore knee from the added weight and pain radiating through my hip and lower back at times, I wasn’t sure if my 49-year-old self could keep up with the mostly young participants.

Meanwhile, Alaimo was working hard to complete the required 40 hours of online classwork and trying to schedule time to finish the field day training, which includes learning how to use engines, pumps, tools and completing a life-saving fire shelter exercise, among other drills. Completing this pro-

cess would enable her to earn her wildland firefighter red card.

The pack test was set for Friday, June 20, which turned out to be a very wet and somewhat cold day. Undeterred, the recruits did a warmup jog and stretches at the Natural Resources Department before proceeding to the old powwow grounds. Wanting to get the test done as soon as possible, Alaimo and I volunteered to be in the first group. When all was said and done, we both passed the test with several minutes to spare.

All in all, I’m glad to have taken on this challenge and would strongly encourage others who are interested in wildland firefighting to at least consider going through the process. Everyone who participated in the pack test with us was helpful and encouraging. I’d also like to give a shout-out to all of the Natural Resources employees, especially Puerini, for being so ac-

commodating during this process.

Michelle’s story

I have always had an interest in photography and a fascination with firefighting. In my time working for the Tribe, I have thought about being on the wildland firefighting crew, but never thought it could be an option due to my full-time position and being unable to be sent out to a fire for days or weeks at a time. So, I was happy to photograph training activities or prescribed burns locally.

Last year, Smoke Signals Editor Danielle Harrison and I were watching the prospective wildland firefighters do the pack test, which is part of receiving your red card to become a wildland firefighter. Harrison stated she was going to do the pack test this year as a personal challenge and I said I’d join her in the challenge. After learning about the red card process, I decided I wanted to try to compete the entire process and earn my red card.

The medical exam was the most in-depth exam I’ve ever had, but if you pass, you know you are healthy!

The pack test was probably the most physically challenging thing I’ve done, yet not as difficult as I envisioned. I started training a few months before the test, but also didn’t train as much as I thought I would.

I didn’t care if I finished last on pack test day, I just didn’t want to fail. The worst part of the pack test was the weight of the 45-pound vest on my collarbone. For me, it was almost more of a mental challenge than a physical one. I just kept telling myself to keep moving and when I successfully completed it, I couldn’t get the vest off fast enough!

To learn more about what’s involved in becoming a wildland firefighter, watch the YouTube video, “Smoke Signals staff trains for wildland firefighting,” by Smoke Signals Social Media/Digital Journalist Kamiah Koch, or call Puerini at 503-879-1696 or Jim Pinder at 503-879-2332. ■

Let’s Create Defensible Space

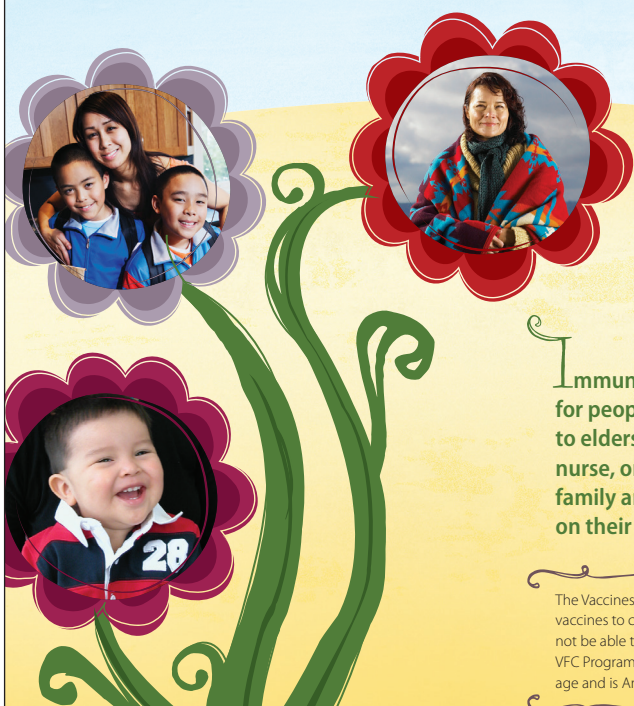
CHECKLIST:

- Roofs and gutters are clean from leaves, conifer needles, and other debris.
- Flammable vegetation is removed from growing directly under the eaves. A minimum of five feet from the structure is recommended.
- eaves, conifer needles, deadwood, bark mulch, and other debris removed from the surface of, around, and below decks and fences.
- The driveway is accessible to first responders (e.g., clear of debris and obstructions; meets local height and width requirements; has clearly marked road signs, bridges, & culverts).
- Small BBQ tanks, not in use, are stored at least 30 feet away or in an outbuilding.
- Exterior attic vents, soffit vents, and areas below decks and patios are covered with 1/8" metal wire mesh.

For more information contact your local fire agency or reach out to our Defensible Space Program for more tips on how to protect yourself and your property this wildfire season.
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HELP GROW YOUR FAMILY STRONG



Immunizations are important for people of all ages, from infants to elders. Talk with your doctor, nurse, or clinic to make sure your family and friends are up-to-date on their vaccinations.

The Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program helps provide vaccines to children whose parents or guardians may not be able to afford them. A child is eligible for the VFC Program if he or she is younger than 19 years of age and is American Indian or Alaska Native.