

How local crews made a difference in California

Deployment to Ventura County provides a sense of unity

By Brenna Visser
Seaside Signal

When Tanner Rich joined the Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department as a part of his Pacifica Project senior year of high school, he never expected he would help fight the largest fire in California history.

Rich, 19, a Seaside native, was deployed to the Thomas Fire in Ventura County, which burned 440 square miles and destroyed more than 1,000 structures.

His previous experience consisted of structure fires, medical calls and helping with the occasional car wreck. So naturally, he was filled with equal parts uncertainty and excitement.

"It was pure shock. Wow — I've never seen something like that before. I grew up in Seaside," Rich said. "Taking in all the burnt houses, seeing people coming back to find their houses was a very somber moment."

Rich was one of the dozen firefighters sent from Clatsop County to fight a variety of fires blazing in Southern California in December. The majority of the task force's time was spent at the Thomas Fire, which has burned more than 280,000 acres and killed one California firefighter.

Fire Chief Ron Tyson of the Olney Walluski Fire & Rescue District, Amy Lenz, Dallas



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Firefighters returned in mid-December after deployment in California.

Ritchie and Justin Perdew of the Knappa Fire District, Brandin Smith and Flint Helligso of the Lewis & Clark Fire Department, Tanner Rich and Angels Perez of the Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department, Chris Dugan, Lt. Genesee Dennis and firefighter Katie Bulleset of the Seaside Fire Department, and Cannon Beach Fire Chief Matt Benedict all returned home safely Dec. 20 in time for Christmas.

This is the third time Clatsop County firefighters have been sent this year to combat blazes outside of their jurisdiction — an anomaly for the region. The next most active summer was in 2015. Personnel were sent out only sparingly before then.

"If we're getting called out all the way out here, I thought, how bad is it down there?" Rich said. "But I was excited to have an opportunity to help."

'We were all one'

While on the scene, Clatsop County firefighters were tasked with protecting homes, putting out hot spots and building fire lines to prevent the inferno from swallowing some of the ritziest neighborhoods near Los Angeles. Crew members trimmed back foliage and set sprinklers around houses to beat back growing flames.

Olney Fire Chief Tyson has been in the business of battling blazes in Oregon since 1986, and has seen a number of wildland fire deployments. But firefighting in Southern California, where rain hasn't fallen since last February, brought unique challenges.

"When we went to Sisters, you could tell they built homes with fire safety in mind. They had backup energy in case the power went out to run the sprinklers, they didn't

have stuff growing up by the house," Tyson said. "But (in California), the yards are full of dry brush litter for mulch, and plants were growing right up by the house. It made our jobs harder, for sure."

What also made this deployment special was the camaraderie of the group, Tyson said. The crew worked 24-hour shifts, judiciously monitoring perimeters and putting out hot spots before they evolved into flames. The days were long and tiring, with members taking turns napping in the fire engines. The news of a California firefighter losing his life in the same fire they were fighting dampened everyone's spirit.

But the bond they formed was invaluable to get through. "If you are going to get deployed with anyone, this is the group to get. We had so much fun, but we took it real serious, too," he said.

Gearhart volunteer Garcia said the bond crews build is one of her favorite aspects of being deployed on larger fires.

"People were encouraging each other, taking care of each other. What I love is that we were all one — not just firefighters from Gearhart, Seaside, Lewis and Clark, et cetera. Those hardworking days and nights, because of the attitude, didn't seem as hard."

Feeling the gratitude

Garcia started firefighting five years ago at Columbia River Fire Department, and just this year served on three task forces to different Oregon and California fires.

"I just wanted to be apart of something and make a difference. That's how I started," Garcia said.

But what has kept her going five years later — even with the long, cold nights of patrol and the feeling of missing her four children back at home — is the feeling the gratitude of the people she protects, she said.

"It's hard to put it into words. It's different than on TV," Garcia said. "You feel the heat of the flames, you feel the worry of these people, but you also feel the gratitude."

Signs championing firefighters and encouraging messages from locals and family were some ways they felt that gratitude, said Dugan, Seaside's fire division chief.

But one homeowner, still diligently moving his sprinkler around his property day in and day out after everyone had evacuated, stood out.

"He said he was a blue-collar guy, not like the rest of the multimillion-dollar homes that were around him. He was an electrician with a small avocado grove behind their house, and we were assigned to protecting his home," Dugan said. "He told us this is all he had — he spent his whole life getting it. He was so grateful when we told him we were going to give him a break from protecting it."

Piece of the puzzle

In the abstract, knowing he was fighting a fire that easily could be the equivalent of the distance to Astoria from Seaside was daunting, Dugan said. But in the day-to-day tedium of tasks, sometimes that awe is lost in translation.

"I was talking to someone on the crew who felt like in the middle of it we weren't doing a whole lot. We weren't on the front lines," Dugan said. "But the Thomas fire is a 10,000-piece puzzle. Maybe we were just one piece, a blue sky piece, but without it the whole puzzle doesn't work. That's what we did."

There's a lot to learn from this year's deployments, both Dugan and Tyson said. While local departments hold semi-regular wildland fire trainings, experiences like this can only prepare local forces better for events in their own backyard.

"Most of these areas hadn't seen fires for 80, 100 years," Tyson said. "The lesson is don't get complacent just because we haven't had a fire like this. Because they hadn't either."

OBITUARIES

Virginia Lee Poppino Gearhart Nov. 8, 1928 — Dec. 8, 2017

Virginia Lee Poppino was born Nov. 8, 1928 in Wallowa, Oregon, and went to be with the Lord on Dec. 8, 2017. Raised on the family farm until she was 9, the family moved to the Oregon Coast in 1937 due to her mother's health.

Virginia attended schools in Olney, Seaside, and Astoria before marrying Gene Poppino Sr. on June 28, 1946. Gene and Virginia traveled widely, visiting nearly every state before they settled down, not long after the birth of their son.

Living on the same property in Gearhart since 1959, they first had a mobile home before Gene built their new home in 1962. Virginia loved her view over the golf course, and got her wish to live in her own home until her death. Gene and Virginia were married 66 years prior to his passing in 2012.

Virginia enjoyed singing, golf, bowling, collecting golf balls she found on her walks near the golf course, and growing flowers. She was an excellent grandma and great-grandma, too.

She was one of the first waitresses when the Pig 'N Pancake opened in Seaside, and she worked there many years before moving into bookkeeping for the family Overhead Door business. She and Gene retired in 1990.

An active Christian, Virginia and Gene attended the Nehalem Valley Community Church for 35 years before relocating to the Lewis & Clark Bible Church in Astoria. Virginia was also active in the Gideon's, where she served as the Memorial Bible Secretary for many years. She also served on the board of directors for the Child Evangelism Fellowship.

Virginia is survived by her son and daughter-in-law, Gene and Anne; two grandsons, Adam and Joe; five great-grandchildren; as well as nieces and nephews.

A memorial service will be held at Lewis & Clark Bible Church, 35082 Seppa Lane, Astoria, Oregon on Saturday, Jan. 6, 2018, at 11 a.m. Donations in Virginia's memory can be made to The Gideon's Memorial Bible Plan.



Virginia Poppino

Dale Frandsen Seaside May 5, 1935 — Dec. 23, 2017



Dale Frandsen, 82, passed away at his home in Seaside on Dec. 23, 2017.

He was born May 5, 1935, in Glasgow, Montana, to Earl and Dorothy Ahl Frandsen. Dale spent his early years on his family's farm near Sisseton, South Dakota, where he also attended school. In 1950 he moved to Astoria, Oregon, and graduated from Astoria High School in 1954.

He served in the U.S. Army, and was a graduate of Elgin Watch and Clockmakers College in Elgin, Illinois.

Mr. Frandsen started in the jewelry business working for Ulaine's Jewelry in Astoria and Del Moore Jewelry in Seaside. In 1961, he purchased the store and changed the name to Frandsen's Jewelry. In 1997, Dale retired from the jewelry store.

On Sept. 24, 1960, he married Shirley Wilson in Astoria. They made their home in Seaside, where they lived the rest of their lives. In retirement, Dale was able to golf, drive his Corvette and spend time with his wife of nearly 54 years.

Dale was a member and past president of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, the Seaside Chamber of Commerce, and Seaside Rotary Club, a member of Seaside Elks and American Legion, and served on the Miss Oregon Pageant Board and on several city and community service committees.

Dale is survived by his two daughters, Sally Frandsen of Olympia, Washington, and Angela Beck (Don) of Seaside; grandchildren Ben Homolac, Joel Homolac, Jessica Moates (Adam) and Amanda Beck; and five great-grandchildren.

A service will be held on Saturday, Jan. 6, at 11 a.m., at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Seaside. There will be a viewing from 10:15 to 10:45 a.m. at the church.

Memorial contributions may be made to Seaside Rotary Foundation or Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Seaside.

Caldwell's Funeral & Cremation Arrangement Center is in charge of the arrangements. Please sign our online guest book at caldwellsmortuary.com



Dale Frandsen

Dorothy Mae Niebuhr Seaside May 27, 1928 — Dec. 3, 2017

Dorothy Mae Niebuhr, age 89, peacefully passed away at her home in Seaside, surrounded by her family, on Sunday, Dec. 3, 2017. She was born on May 27, 1928, in Los Angeles, California, to Raymond and Ida Jacobs. Dorothy graduated in 1946 from Washington High School in Los Angeles.

She married Raymond Niebuhr on Nov. 20, 1946, in Los Angeles. Following their wedding, they moved to Walcott, Iowa. They had three children and lived in Walcott until 1958, when they moved to Beaverton, Oregon.

Dorothy was a person of many gifts and talents. Bright and inquisitive, she had a knack for solving problems, thinking strategically and finding good bargains. She enjoyed playing golf and duplicate bridge, shopping, traveling, exploring new places and challenges.

At one point in her life, she restored old homes and built new ones from the ground up — a real feat in those days before women were accepted in construction trades. She happily took on several young men as apprentices during her home-building days, men who went on to pursue careers in construction. Each of these men remained good friends with Dorothy, and always expressed their gratitude for the learning opportunities and "career start" she provided.

When her children were young, she planned annual summer vacations, driving or taking the train from Iowa to destinations out west. She knew the locations of all significant historical markers along the route, and made sure her family stopped for each one. Dorothy or one of her children read them aloud, and once back on the road they'd talk about the events and people of that historical place.

In the second half of her life, Dorothy began traveling again, expanding her horizons. She visited Alaska three times, including a side trip into the Arctic Circle. With good friends from Seaside, she went to New England one autumn, and experienced the spectacular fall colors. She cruised through the Panama Canal, and journeyed down the Amazon River, venturing up its tributaries to remote indigenous villages. She hiked around Machu Pichu, and explored other ancient ruins in Mexico, China, Thailand and Cambodia. There was no end to her curiosity and interest in different countries, cultures, and people.

Yet more than building houses, playing golf and bridge or traveling, Dorothy loved her family and friends. She raised two families, her three children and later, three grandchildren. Her home and heart were always open and welcoming. She had a gift for reaching out and connecting with people in a deep, enduring way. She truly enriched the lives of many, and definitely lived her life to the fullest.

She is survived by her three children, Susan Niebuhr McCormick (Greg) of Polson, Montana, Sally Niebuhr Higgs (Kendall) of Seaside, and Michael Niebuhr (Debbie Fry) of Cannon Beach; her five grandchildren, Genesee Dennis (Anna), Lineah Dennis, and Shellie Dennis, all of Seaside, Sage Marie Niebuhr of Arch Cape and Rachel Niebuhr of Portland; and by her six great-grandchildren, all of Seaside.

A celebration of Dorothy's life is planned for late spring 2018.

If friends would like to make a donation in her honor, please consider giving to Camp Kiwanilong in Warrenton or to Lower Columbia Hospice in Astoria.



Dorothy Niebuhr

MEETINGS

Monday, Jan. 8
Seaside City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Thursday, Jan. 11
Cannon Beach Academy, 5:30 p.m. 3718 S. Hemlock St., Cannon Beach.

Seaside Convention Center Commission, 5 p.m., 415 First Avenue.

Gearhart Planning Commission, 6 p.m., 698 Pacific Way, Gearhart.

Tuesday, Jan. 16
Seaside School District Board of Directors, 6 p.m., 1801 S. Franklin, Seaside.
Seaside Planning Commission, work session, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Wednesday, Jan. 17
Seaside Tourism Advisory Committee, 3 p.m., 989 Broadway.

Thursday, Jan. 18
Seaside Tree Board, 4 p.m.,

City Hall, 989 Broadway.
Seaside Transportation Advisory Commission, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Monday, Jan. 22
Seaside City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Tuesday, Jan. 23
Seaside Airport Advisory Committee, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

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