

September 27, 2012

Auxiliary fire fighters tell their story

At five foot four, and 125 pounds, Ashley Mills was worried she might not make the cut. Less than two years later, the 26-year-old volunteer with Campbell River's No.2 Fire Hall in Willow Point is fully certified to work as a fire fighter anywhere in North America.

"I was nervous, I mean, look at me!" Ashley says. "I was worried they'd think I couldn't do it because of my small stature. I work out really hard to develop my strength."

Ashley says she felt welcome and comfortable right away, and when the fire department bought special (smaller) boots and mask for her, she knew she was part of the team. And it's turned out she has a special role to play.

"When we're called out to a fire, it's like we're a small army, each with our special strengths. My size is particularly helpful when we're working in small spaces, like an attic," she says.

But don't let her size fool you. Ashley can carry a six-foot, 200-pound man down a ladder, and she can carry a ladder up a ladder. "It's all in the technique," she assures. *"Even if you're a ballerina like me, you can do it. Anyone can do it."*

When Adam Fraser answered the call for auxiliary fire fighter recruits, he wondered if he was physically up to it too. *"I'm 5'11", but I was 198 lbs and out of shape. I now go to the gym three or four days a week and am down to 180 lbs."* says the 37-year-old who volunteers out of the No.1 Hall on Dogwood Street.

But Adam's main concern was whether he could commit the time. *"The first two years of basic training are really busy, and I'm married, with two kids. Plus, I'm part of the senior management team at London Drugs, and I commute to Courtenay. And have volunteer commitments to coach little league baseball and soccer."*

Even with so many demands on his time, Adam wanted something to do that was just for him, something "adult-oriented" and challenging. *"Volunteering with the fire department is the one thing that's my thing to do,"* he says, adding: *"Although, I do bring my kids sometimes to play on the fire engine. The fire hall is very family-oriented."*

With his employer and family's support, and with plenty of notice for additional training days (which the fire department aims to limit to one weekend day a month), Adam's fit it into his schedule. When he's nationally certified in April 2013, the training schedule will ease off a bit.

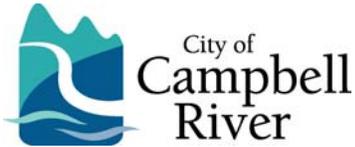
What draws people to volunteering as a fire fighter? For Ashley and Adam, it was the challenge.

Adam wanted to build on his martial arts training, and to know if he could climb up a 75-foot ladder that looked to be pointing straight up in the air. *"I remember thinking: I can't believe I just did that!"* he recalls.

For Ashley, *"it's part of my personality to want to try things out of my comfort zone like rock climbing and jumping out of planes. My partner is very proud of me, and my mother says: 'what were you thinking?' but I know she's proud of me too."*

And there's the rewarding sense of purpose, of "giving back."

"You get that page, and you're there. You're needed. You make room in your time," explains Ashley, who is the restaurant manager for Duke's Grill. *"If I get a page at work, as long as I've got someone there to cover, I can go. My boss has even driven me to the call. You want to go so bad."*



The excitement, the rush, the thrill, and knowing they've helped someone in need keep these volunteers hooked.

"The worst thing is missing a page," agrees Adam.

Learning the skills is also rewarding, and not something you'd pick up in real life, they point out.

"It's hands-on, it's complex, it's the highest level of skill and professionalism," Adam says. *"And there's nothing but support. It's always okay to ask questions. And people are looking out for each other."*

"It's not dangerous," Ashley adds. *"There are so many safety precautions, and we're so thoroughly trained."*

The sense of accomplishment and the strong bond of the life-saving team are high on their list of reasons to volunteer too.

"The fire fighters are amazing people, and I can't imagine letting them down," Adams says. *"If anyone wants to join a group that really wants to see you succeed, that genuinely cares about you. If you want to give back and feel accomplished and have rock solid friendships, nothing else compares. And, the kids get to play on the fire truck."*

Are you up for the challenge of steep ladders, height and claustrophobia, all while wearing heavy fire-fighting gear? Test yourself by applying to be an auxiliary fire fighter. If you're interested, contact the City of Campbell River Fire Department to join the program. Call them at 250-286-6266. Or download the application from www.campbellriver.ca (Look under Residents/Fire and Rescue)

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250-286-6266