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FEATURES

Fire house living

Students get hands-on training while helping local departments

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WATERBORO — A couple of weeks ago, as the ambulance made its way to the hospital and EMTs were tending to the patient's needs, John Malia reached out to do what he could to comfort the woman, who had dementia.

"I held her hand on the way to hospital," said Malia, a student in the fire science program at Southern Maine Community College. "It was a good feeling."

Malia is among 60 SMCC fire science students living in 26 fire stations in 16 communities in York and Cumberland counties as part of the school's Public Safety Live-In program.

Malia, of Dover, N.H., lives at Central Station in Waterboro along with Eric Jackson of Haddam, Conn. and Alex Considine of Brattleboro, Vt., in an apartment they keep spotless on the second floor of the firehouse. Malia and Jackson spoke with a reporter on a recent weekday; Considine was out of town.

In exchange for their living quarters, the three men are on duty answering calls from midnight to 8 a.m. and every other weekend. As well, they're responsible for stocking and checking two trucks each week — a utility vehicle that carries chain saws and portable pumps and other equipment, and a service pick-up truck. They work at fires, on the rescue and do chores inside the firehouse. Their duties vary and change as their training progresses, said Captain Pete Turgeon, who heads the Waterboro live-in program. If they're asked to answer calls when they're not on duty, they get paid for the work.

In joining the fire service, Jackson, who was a junior firefighter in his hometown and had an EMT certification before he came to SMCC, is following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather.

Malia, with firefighter 1 and 2 courses completed in high school, is in the process of completing a basic EMT course, among others he's studying this semester.

He and Jackson both say one big reason they chose SMCC is the live-in program. In fact, Jackson was thinking of going to fire school in his home state, but learned about the SMCC program from his high school guidance counselor.

"I'm liking it, and I didn't think I would," he said of the fire science program. "The classes are something I want to learn.

"As for the live-in program, I like helping the community, and I like helping people," Jackson said.

Still, living at the firehouse isn't for everyone, Turgeon said.

"It can be a challenge," said the veteran firefighter.

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John Malia lifts a chainsaw from the back of an equipment truck Wednesday at the station. He is one of three fire science students at Southern Maine Community College who take part in the station's live-in program. JEFF LAGASSE/JOURNAL TRIBUNE

Students must keep up with their school work and with their duties in the firehouse in a professional manner. And there are house rules, too. Students must be on the property by 10 p.m., and even if they are of legal drinking age – and these ones aren't – there's no alcohol allowed on the premises.

"It takes maturity," said Turgeon. "We've had some that couldn't quite grasp it. You have to maintain a certain level of expectation. Some make it, some don't."

The live-in program offers students a huge advantage over their counterparts in the form of hands-on training, said Turgeon. Fire departments looking to hire know about the live-in program and know the students who've been through it can hit the ground running. And for the department housing the students, well, it's manpower. While their duties depend on what training they've had, they're a help, especially for small departments that rely heavily on a volunteer force.

Now in its 23rd year, the live-in program is a mutual benefit to students and fire departments, said Steve Willis, who chairs the SMCC fire science department. Many students are assigned to locales where there is little or no full-time staffing and communities gain by having firefighters in the station overnight. For students, they get a chance to apply what they've learned in the classroom in the field.

In York County, besides the 8-year-old program in Waterboro, there are live-in programs in Alfred, Buxton and at Goodwin's Mills Fire-Rescue, which serves Dayton and Lyman.

In Alfred, Fire Chief David Lord said the department has had a live-in program for eight or nine years, developed by him and Rescue chief Matt Bors, who is also Waterboro's full-time fire chief. Most students are from SMCC, but some have hailed from Thomas College or the University of Southern Maine, he said.

"It has proven to be very successful," said Lord.

Students cover nighttime calls and do scheduled chores around the Alfred fire and rescue building and are trained to operate all of the department's apparatus and equipment.

The students receive the benefit of free housing, use of the facilities, additional training and field experience, he said.

"This might not look like much at first glance, but pays huge dividends on the other end as it develops a much more rounded, higher trained and experienced individual who is more marketable to potential employers," said Lord.

Goodwin's Mills Fire-Rescue has live-in students for the first time this school year, said Chief Rod Hooper. Until the fire station was expanded last fall, there wasn't the room for the program, he said.

"It's an extra set of hands," said Hooper, a firefighter there for 30 years. "They run calls. They're definitely an asset. We have extra help, and we put them to work."

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