

Fire Department Number Two, All in a Day's Work

by Patrick Bouvier Fitzgerald Burris

You hope that you never have to call them but when you do, they are on the scene in minutes, the men at Fire Station Number Two. It is a quiet Saturday night when firefighters Jeff Cook, Joey Hager, and Todd Robitaille agree to speak with me about their duties at the South Boulevard location.

For these professionals, there is no such thing as an ordinary workday. And, they like it that way averaging four to five calls daily. "We recently responded to 25 calls," said nine-year veteran Jeff Cook. Calls range from minor events, helping an elderly individual attempting to change smoke detector batteries to responding to drug overdoses, and auto accidents in addition to fires.

In addition to the Dilworth neighborhood, coverage includes the I-77 South corridor down to Woodlawn and Clanton Roads, the I-277 loop, and I-77 North to West Trade Street including the 3rd and 4th street section uptown. Rapid and abundant development presents challenges, bigger structures and more to tackle. But, this is also an opportunity to learn.

"Whenever we see new construction rising, we check it out and determine what it is constructed out of, and get a layout of the structure, as well, in the event that we have to respond there for an emergency," said Joey Hager. Required to complete eight hours of monthly continuing education instruction, Hager and the crew are busy online completing training modules and at the Fire Academy on Shopton Road in west Charlotte. The training never stops.

Fire prevention training and safety is something they also provide the community seeking to make homes and businesses safer. An ongoing mission, they are available for those wishing to learn about proper fire extinguisher usage and installation, hazards associated with oxygen use and organizations eager to teach children fire prevention skills.

Asked about the commercial and residential building boom in their zone all three welcome it. New construction is actually a "blessing" because it is generally constructed of "fire resistant materials" and "abandoned buildings are now residential and commercial structures no longer havens for the homeless and potential fire hazards."

They aim to respond in four minutes from the time of dispatch. Many confuse this with the time they reach a 911 operator. The clock starts ticking when they receive the call at the local station from dispatch, which is when you hear the all too familiar sirens, see Engine 2 exit onto South Boulevard rushing to serve and to protect.

You can help them to meet this requirement by slowing down, pulling to the right side of the road, and giving them the right of way when you see the overhead caution lights flashing in front of the South Boulevard station. Every second counts when it comes to saving lives and fire fighting. Many motorists don't know how to respond when encountering crews responding to calls.

Starting salaries range from the lower thirties for those without a degree to \$32,400 for those with any BA or BS degree or a two-year fire science diploma from Central Piedmont Community College. Beginning in 2000, the two-year fire science diploma was required for City of Charlotte firefighters attaining the rank of captain. UNCC offers a BS in Fire Safety Engineering Technology.

Moreover, they seek individuals desiring to be firefighters versus those looking solely for paychecks and tickets to retirement. Prior volunteer fire department experience is a plus. The screening, application, and interview process is a thorough one, which includes an extensive criminal and background check. Felony convictions disqualify candidates, and misdemeanors are reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Training generally begins a year later, and class sizes average 20-22 individuals.

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