

Firefighter making history in South Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Leslie Asbury didn't grow up dreaming of being a firefighter. But she became one. She didn't set out to break ground in South Lake Tahoe, but she is. She isn't saying she will be a fire chief one day, but she's on that path.

The 38-year-old South Lake Tahoe firefighter is about to earn her captain's pin. And in doing so she will be the first female captain in South Lake Tahoe Fire Department's history.

"The thing I love about this job is you never know what you are going to get when come to work," Asbury told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Unfortunately, you deal with lot of people's really bad days. We try to make it better. It takes a lot of training and education."



Leslie Asbury is South Lake Tahoe Fire Department's first woman captain.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Asbury went to college to become a magazine writer. As she was about to graduate she knew that was not the profession she wanted to pursue. She thought firefighting might interest her

so she set up a meeting with a director of an academy in San Jose. That week there was a seminar about women in fire service.

"I fell in love with it," Asbury said. "The biggest thing is helping people; trying to make a difference in their situation."

She started with CalFire seasonally in 1998 in Santa Clara.

Asbury took a break to go to paramedic school. Then she went back to CalFire in the Indian Wells area.

She started with South Lake Tahoe in November 2002 as a firefighter-paramedic. A handful of years ago she was promoted to engineer. In May she found out she would be captain.

It's not a matter of having a higher up promote an individual to captain. A written test, tactical simulation exercise, public presentation, an exercise involving managing a crew and writing a staff report for the chief were some of the criteria to be considered for the promotion to captain.

Plus, there were the prerequisites to apply – the necessary state fire training and education.

"The folks I have worked with, men and women, they want to be identified as firefighters first," Fire Chief Bruce Martin told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Women in fire is something I have seen all my career."

Martin started in business in 1978. Today, across the U.S. the fire service is still a male-dominated profession, with about 10 percent of the work force being women, Martin said.

He said about five years ago he was at a women's firefighting conference where the group was celebrating the first retirees – showing that a generation of women firefighters have gone through the ranks.

“It brings a necessary diversity to our departments that help us relate better to our communities,” Martin said of having women on staff.

Asbury said being a woman has never been an issue for her at this department. And she doesn’t foresee her promotion changing that.

What she sees changing is having to do more paperwork.

One of the main responsibilities of a captain is being in charge at the scene of an emergency.

“(I will be) making decisions how to mitigate that emergency. Along with that comes the responsibility of making sure your crew is safe and goes home safely,” Asbury said

For Asbury, the hardest calls are the ones that involve children.

Being on the ground June 27, 2007, was hard too. She fought to save homes, but 254 were destroyed in the Angora Fire.

“It was hard to see friends’ houses burned down,” Asbury said.

One of the more memorable calls was when a guy died in front of the crew, but using a defibrillator the paramedics revived him. He was transported to the hospital and lived.

Running and cycling are ways for Asbury to clear her mind of the day’s events – especially the unpleasant ones. She also skis and does triathlons – the half Ironmans.

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Note:

- Pinning ceremony is June 28, 4pm, Lake Tahoe Airport.
- Tyler Jack will also receive his captain’s pin.

