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(L TO R) PHILIP BROCKHOFF, KYLE PARENTEAU, MEAGAN PRICE AND DAN ROBINSON EXTINGUISHED WILDFIRES PREVENTING MILLIONS IN PROPERTY DAMAGE. NOT PICTURED ARE BRANDON GIESE AND QUENTIN NELSON



## ROOKIE FIRE FIGHTERS

Rutland high school students learn what it takes to battle wildfires

The summer of 2009 was one of the most destructive wildfire seasons in BC history. The wildfire management branch of the BC Ministry of Forests and Range reported that 3,045 wildfires burned across the province requiring more than 1,000 firefighters. Among them were six Kelowna students: Meagan Price, Brandon Giese, Kyle Parenteau, Dan Robinson, Philip Brockhoff and Quentin Nelson, who were part of a unique firefighting program at Rutland Senior Secondary School (RSS).

"Between the two crews we worked on 15 or 16 different fires," says teacher, Wayne Price, "everything from a five-metre by five-metre lightning strike to the Terrace Mountain fire that was 15,000 hectares or larger. We really did the whole gamut in terms of size and experience. We were all over the Valley from the top of the

connector to the eastern boundary of Big White and then across the lake up to McCullough."

The school program provides students with basic fire suppression and safety (S-100) training and they learn to use global positioning systems, chainsaws, compasses, climbing equipment and all-terrain vehicles. Students also qualify as level one certified utility arborists. Their firefighting and silviculture education prepares them for junior firefighting opportunities and post-secondary education. But for the handful of students selected to join Price on summer crews, nothing could entirely prepare them for the real thing.

"It was exciting," says Brandon Giese. "The first time out there, I did an overnight shift from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. There were 10 people on the crew. We used water pumps and sprayed with hoses. Two tanker trucks would drive up and keep refilling the pump. It was a long night because we didn't get much rest. We took a break at about

PHOTO BY WAYNE PRICE



midnight and started up again at about 3 a.m. We didn't have tents — just slept on the ground."

Like all firefighters, the students wore fire-resistant jumpsuits and boots, despite the stifling heat, and had to climb hillsides carrying a 20-litre water tank, firefighter's rake, pickaxe and shovel. And they learned first hand the unpredictable nature of wildfire.

"On the Terrace Mountain fire," says Giese, "we were sent out into the backside of the blaze. We wanted to stop the fire from jumping the road because we use that as a guard. Three helicopters came by to dump then we noticed that there were ashes landing behind us and we started seeing smoke spots. By the time we got what we needed and got back to the truck, flames were going over both sides of the hill and it had jumped the road. I got some pretty cool pictures of driving through the fire." Giese says his mother was less than pleased but he shrugs it off as part of the job.

Despite the challenges and dangers, most of the students are eager to continue. Quentin Nelson plans to work on a ground crew this summer after graduation. "Someday I'd like to do structural firefighting for the Kelowna fire department. I want to be a person who puts everything on the line to save people. It was amazing to be involved in something this important, especially at our age; we were the youngest crew."

A few students in the 20-year history of the RSS program have also considered joining the "Rap Attack" team. Alan Kolkind, who teaches the course with Price, took students on a tour of the Rap Attack base at Salmon Arm. There, specialized firefighters train to rappel out of aircraft with chainsaws, pumps and other equipment to fight fires in mountainous regions. —Lisa Harrison

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