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FIVE UM STUDENTS WORK AS FIREMEN

By Michael J. Pane
UM Information Services

MISSOULA --

Many University of Montana students clerk at grocery stores, some sell shoes, others wash dishes, but five UM students are helping themselves through college in another way. They are firemen.

Why would a college student go out at all hours of the night in all kinds of weather to assist professional firemen in the difficult, often dangerous job of fighting fires?

"Student firemen usually come here to avoid having to pay for a room, but after they are here for a while they begin to realize the importance of their job," said Robert Kelly, Missoula fire chief.

The UM students are not professional firemen, although some of them would like to be professionals. The "sleepers" or "student firemen" get free room and \$10 per month.

Four of the students live at the Missoula Fire Department's Southside Station, 247 Mount Ave., and one lives at the Headquarter Station, 200 West Pine.

They can sleep and study in privacy. However, they share a common room with the other men where they read, watch tv or play cards. There is also a kitchen where they cook and eat their meals.

The only thing that is required of the sleepers is that they must be in the firehouse between the hours of 11 p.m. and 8 a.m. to assist on night fires.

"The student firemen are valuable to the company because we have limited manpower at night. There are only five men at the headquarters station and three at the southside station on night shift," Kelly said. "The students help relieve the burden of doing the small tasks at fires, leaving my combat men free to fight the fires,

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"They get us set up. They help with hydrant hook-ups, lay hose, chase tools and carry ladders. They get a minimum amount of training to learn the basics of fire operations."

Fire fighting is a dangerous job. A few years ago a sleeper was injured when a brick wall fell on him. His knee was injured seriously enough to require surgery and rehabilitation.

"We make a strong effort to keep the student firemen out of dangerous situations, but it isn't always possible," Kelly explained. "They are covered under the city's industrial accident insurance as city employees. This is the reason we pay them the \$10."

Kelly cited the values of having student firemen on the fire fighting force.

"The student firemen's greatest value to the community is in providing manpower. Fire companies are graded by an association of fire insurance companies according to equipment, trucks, geography, fire alarm systems, manpower and various other things.

"Recently we went from a class five to a class four company. The companies are graded on a scale of 1 to 10. Class 10 is the same as unprotected. The better the protection a company can give, the higher the class.

"For us to go up to a class three we would have to hire 30 or 40 more men. This is economically unfeasible for Missoula. The sleepers are counted in this grading as additional manpower. Fire insurance companies use this classification system to set rates. When we went from class five to class four, the savings on insurance premiums in Missoula was between \$80,000 and \$85,000."

Although the sleepers differ in their ages, what they are studying in school and the amount of experience they have with the fire company, they have one thing in common--a feeling of satisfaction from helping people.

Larry Clawson, senior in journalism from Missoula, said:

"I get a great deal of satisfaction out of the knowledge that I am doing something valuable. Being a sleeper gives me the opportunity to get involved directly in helping people.

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"I became a sleeper because it was a place to stay. The job isn't that glorious until you get out on a fire. Then it's really something. It's an interesting job. It's different. It gives a University student an opportunity to play fireman for a year yet leaving him free to go on to another job when he graduates."

Skip Meek, a junior in forestry from Westerville, Ohio, likes the excitement of fire fighting.

"There is a real thrill to being a fireman," said Meek. "There is the sense of urgency. Every run is a new feeling. You keep asking yourself what am I going to face this time? Maybe this time somebody is in real trouble."

Tim Norman, junior in education from Missoula, became a sleeper recently because he wanted to be involved in the community.

"At first there is a lot of glamour and excitement but since the recent rash of fires, I've learned that there is more to it than that. Sure, the thrill stays with you but you also begin to see the importance of what you are doing. I get a lot of satisfaction out of doing a good job and I like the atmosphere of living with dedicated firemen."

Both Clawson and Darrell Johnson, a junior in political science from Missoula, are interested in fire fighting as a career.

"There's no question that if I didn't have a military obligation and if there was an opening, I would become a fireman," Johnson said. "This is the best job I ever had. It's the lowest paying job but the best. It's exciting and it is a job that gives a person a chance to become responsibly involved with saving lives and property."

Bart Trucano, a graduate student in forestry from Spearfish, S.D., is the only sleeper at the Headquarters Station. He said that although he has only been a sleeper for two weeks he likes it and finds it interesting.

"It's interesting to see how a fire fighting operation works from the inside," he said. "So far it's exciting but I need to learn more about it. The main reason I became a student fireman was that I wanted to try something different in a living arrangement. Now that I have been out on some fires though, I am beginning to realize how important being a fireman is."