

International Conference of Fire Service Women

by Alicia Duzinski

I recently had the pleasure of attending the International Conference of Fire Service Women in Atlanta, Georgia hosted by Women in the Fire Service (WFS). WFS started back in 1982 as an organization of 200 women firefighters scattered throughout the nation. Since those early days WFS has grown almost 600 percent, with over 100 women firefighters joining annually, as well as supportive male firefighters, fire departments, college fire science programs and other institutions contributing to overall membership.

WFS produces two newsletters and provides resources on recruitment, physical abilities testing, sexual harassment and discrimination, and other issues important to fire departments and wildland fire agencies. They also provide advocacy for women fire fighters on a national level.

The biennial conferences are educationally valuable and lots of fun. The first afternoon we were treated to tour of the Martin Luther King National Historic District and a special talk from a minister who marched and preached along side Reverend King during the civil rights movement. We also toured the first fire department in Atlanta and got a historic perspective on fire history in the city.

During the opening ceremonies, we were treated to a full firefighter parade with a bagpipe band and flags for each country represented. Firefighters traveled from New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Taiwan, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, and from all over the U.S. It was fascinating to talk to people from other countries and to see what techniques and strategies they used to fight fire.

Teresa Edwards, five-time Olympic basketball champion, was the keynote speaker. She related how firefighting required exceptional teamwork and strength of character, very similar to playing world-class basketball. She also said that in any situation you are only as strong as your weakest link and that by working together and mentoring we work to maximize our strengths.

Once the conference got underway we chose from multiple seminars with a wide variety of topics important to both wildland and structural fire fighting. I attended sessions about firefighting opportunities

overseas and learned about fire programs in Indonesia and Russia. Other seminars discussed recruitment, physical fitness, leadership and supervisory roles, giving constructive feedback, creative confrontation and mentoring. There was also a full day recruitment fair where wildland and structural firefighters demonstrated to possible recruits how they shine in their different fire environments.

I attended a forum for wildland firefighters and it was such a rewarding experience to be in a room full of female firefighters. Usually there are just a few of us in fire camp and it is so rare to have so many women in one place. We learned that no matter where we come from we all have similar concerns, issues and a common love for our jobs.

For me the most powerful session was about internalized sexism—basically how as women we are taught to behave a certain way from the time we are little girls. The class leader asked some very pointed questions about how we thought of ourselves and interacted with others and then demonstrated how this is all learned behavior and that boys are actually taught to be different than girls. The leader also showed how these self-actualizing stereotypes can be quite harmful both personally and professionally in a male-dominated work environment. The saddest thing about this seminar was when the leader asked who in the class had ever been sexually harassed, assaulted or discriminated against at work, and almost every single person in the class raised their hands. I believe that as women firefighters we have made great strides to progress in gaining the respect of our male counterparts. However, if in a room of 40 women almost everyone had experienced these problems, then we still have room for improvement. The leader was quite helpful in giving us the tools to deal with future problems in constructive ways. The most important thing to remember is that no matter what, male or female, we are firefighters who need to work together to survive in this potentially dangerous career.

Overall the WFS Conference provided an excellent opportunity to network, build friendships and learn about how other agencies and fire departments deal with the issues facing firefighters in the new millen-

nium.

Alicia Duzinski is a Fire Program Technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She spent most of last summer working on wildland fires in New Mexico and

Montana. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.