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MEDIA RELEASE

COLAC FIRE BRIGADE SETS A GOOD EXAMPLE

As the busiest and biggest fire brigade in CFA district 6, Colac's volunteers like to set a good example.

With a strong focus on training and safety, the 100 per cent volunteer CFA brigade works closely with counterparts across the region and further afield when needed.

For veteran brigade secretary Andrew Bath it's all part of being prepared for anything...even fires that top 600 degrees.

Andrew joined the brigade 34 years ago, not long after moving to Colac. He's been secretary for the past 20 years.

He says the brigade's work is more involved, busier and more complex now, but the volunteers have adjusted to meet the demand.

A new automatic response system adopted with neighbouring brigades will ensure a quick response to incidents in town and across the region.

"A lot of our calls are support for surrounding brigades," Andrew said. "We make sure they have the support they need nice and quickly and we've recently modified our response arrangements so surrounding brigades respond into town to boost numbers for more complex jobs."

The brigade responds to about 250 calls each year, often contributing to the CFA's volunteer surge capacity across the state when major disasters happen. It has a pumper, pumper-tanker, tanker and an all-terrain vehicle used for carrying equipment or troops.

There are more than 40 active volunteers ranging in age from 16 to 70s, including about 10 women.

Andrew said that on top of nationally accredited training volunteers undertake for specific roles, they also undertake regular fortnightly training, skills practice and practical drills

“We’re confident in what we do and we’re big on safety and taking precautions,” he said. “We don’t rush in; we evaluate things first and make an informed safety decision.”

“There are no staffed stations around and we’re the largest brigade in the district so we try to set a good example for the other brigades.”

The professional training came in particularly handy at one major local structure fire several years ago at a government building complex. “I remember that was fairly heated,” Andrew said. “That fire killed a thermal imaging camera and they cut out after about 600 degrees.”

Local volunteer crews from the brigade have joined fellow firefighters at incidents throughout Victoria and as far afield as Sydney and Kangaroo Island.

They know the same could be expected in return if a major fire happened locally.

Volunteer captain Scott Peschel says the brigade is well placed for what is tipped to be a hot summer.

“We’ve been doing the usual pre-summer preparations with safety and survival drills,” Captain Peschel said.

“We have about 40 active members on the books and we pick up new members from time-to-time,” he said.

“We’re getting people from all different walks of life that make it a dynamic group with different perspectives.”

Scott echoes the sentiment about regional collaboration.

“Probably half of our calls are supporting other brigades in the group,” he said. “We travel 70-80 kilometres away to places like Lavers Hill or Beech Forest. We’re fairly busy and get a variety of jobs, including structure fires and helping at motor vehicle accidents.”

Junior brigade leader Kim Tucker has a family history of firefighting and was inspired to join by her daughter Shakira – a junior member and now an active firefighter in the senior brigade.

Kim always wanted to be a volunteer firefighter but family commitments prevented that until Shakira joined the junior brigade about five years ago.

“All I knew was that they had an event where they ran with hoses,” Kim laughed, but she was quick to learn the ropes and become an active member, fully involved teaching junior brigade members a range of firefighting skills. The juniors also take part in the VFBV urban running competitions and have participated in four state championships.

“I have a pacemaker and thought that would rule me out but it turns out I could join and since then I’ve been an active firefighter and absolutely love it.”

Kim also works in as a fire equipment maintenance service technician for the CFA.

She says the volunteers at Colac make a highly skilled and professional team and she feels confident working alongside her counterparts, from her first major incident joining a strike team to the Wye River Christmas Day fire. “We do as much training as we can and we work well together; I’m very confident that the crew has my back and I have their back,” she said.

Shakira, 18, is now a senior member and has joined her Mum responding to a few incidents.

“It’s lovely that we get to do that together,” Kim said. Her eight-year-old daughter Tessa Tucker-Schwan can’t wait to join juniors and progress to full membership.

Kim is enthusiastic about the future of the brigade, with six new juniors joining in recent months, following in the footsteps of five young women who advanced together from the junior brigade to senior ranks.

Showing the brigade’s versatility, members recently used a fire extinguisher to douse a fire in a Telstra pit.

“We had to sit back and watch and try to work out what was happening while we saw some very pretty blue and green and orange flames,” Kim said. “We found there was a gas line running under the pit and it was very hot so it was safest to use the extinguisher.”

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria CEO Andrew Ford said volunteers like those at Colac are essential to public safety and provide a professional service that is effective and affordable.

“Our dedicated volunteers are trained to national professional standards, are highly experienced and always improving what they do continuing a great Australian tradition that is justifiably valued and well respected in our communities,” Mr Ford said.

Mr Ford said volunteers are part of the fabric of society and contribute to community resilience.

“Our volunteers provide about \$1 billion worth of service each year and contribute to the CFA’s well-established ability to mobilise huge numbers of highly trained and experienced volunteers to deal with major incidents,” he added.

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