

Auxiliary Firefighters receive Mayor's Award of Excellence

By Mayor Holmes

The annual Mayor's Award of Excellence is a recognition given by the mayor to a local organization or group that makes an outstanding contribution to the community.

This year's recipients are the Summerland Auxiliary Firefighters. I had the honour of presenting the award to several of the firefighters at the Business and Community Excellence Awards gala hosted by the Summerland Chamber of Commerce on April 1.

The Summerland Fire Department has five full-time staff: the chief, two deputy chiefs, and two career firefighters. That's not enough responders for emergencies like a structure fire. Yet, a town the size of Summerland doesn't have the financial resources to support a Fire Department staffed with a full complement of professional firefighters.

That's why the community has always relied on on-call auxiliaries.

Currently, there are 29 auxiliary firefighters, all of whom have regular jobs like tradespersons, orchardists, school teachers, and municipal employees.

They can be called out to an emergency at any time, day or night. Their work is strenuous and often performed in uncertain and hazardous conditions.

Kevin Bond, a local teacher who has been an auxiliary firefighter since 2007, says, "We often don't know what we'll be walking into, or how dynamic and complex a scene will be. We fall back on our ongoing training to achieve the best outcome."

Summerland auxiliaries are trained to the highest 'full service' level from provincial firefighter standards and are enrolled in the internationally recognized National Fire Prevention Association.

They complete thousands of hours of rigorous training to ensure they can work confidently and safely at fire scenes.

While there's a sense of accomplishment after controlling a fire or conducting a rescue, the costs associated with firefighting can be high. Aside from health risks associated with exposure to smoke and chemicals, the work can be stressful and disruptive to home life.

Kevin says, "Some calls that we respond to can be tragic, and certain things we are tasked to do can be personally impactful which is inadvertently brought home, particularly calls that result in a person passing away or receiving life changing injuries. Although we train consistently to achieve the best outcome, there are times that tragedy is a reality and a fact of life."

Some Fire Department members have received training in Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and lead other members through a formal debrief within a couple days of a call.

Kevin has led three debriefs in the last six months, and has recently completed training so he can play a greater role leading newer members into the fire service.

“The members of the Summerland Fire Department are close,” he says. “We work alongside each other and trust each other. As we approach an unknown scenario, we need to know we have the training, mental fortitude, and friendships needed to successfully complete an objective.”

The Auxiliary Firefighters are a special group who provide an invaluable service to the community. For this reason, they are this year’s recipient of the Mayor’s Award of Excellence.

Mayor’s Award of Excellence recipients:

2010 – Healthcare Auxiliary
2011 – Rotary Club
2012 – Lions Club
2013 – Critter Aid
2014 – Sister City Committee
2015 – Food Bank
2016 – Kettle Valley Steam Railway
2017 – Legion Branch 22
2018 – Emergency Support Services
2019 – Blossom Youth Ambassador Program
2020 and 2021 – No award presented
2022 – Auxiliary Firefighters

Doug Holmes is Mayor of Summerland