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UNH students get on-the-job fire training

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WEST HAVEN, Conn.

When University of New Haven sophomore Ed Ball is jarred from sleep by a screeching alarm, he can't just hit snooze and roll over.

Ball and four other students are spending the semester out of the dorm and inside the Allingtown firehouse, where they will get hands-on experience as firefighter interns. When that alarm sounds, it means there might be a fire somewhere, and these interns need to get in gear and hop on the truck. No time for hesitation or nerves. And that's what they love about the job.

"I'm one kid who is living ... his childhood dream," Ball said.

The five interns are enrolled in UNH's fire science program and are working toward earning a bachelor's degree with a focus on fire science technology, fire administration or fire and arson investigation. They are all either certified, or getting certified, by the state to fight fires. Most have prior experience as volunteer firefighters in their hometowns. But this is their first time living at the firehouse and earning school credit for fighting fires.

Allingtown Volunteer Fire Association Chief John Carew said the program is mutually beneficial for the community and for the firefighters.

"The goal is to provide a service to the West Haven community and to supply the paid department with more manpower. The other side is, the students get experience," he said.

For years the Allingtown Fire Department ran an internship program for students enrolled in the UNH fire science program. That was back when Allingtown operated two stations and had room at the Minor Park fire station to house a few interns. When the department moved all of its firefighters into the Minor Park station and made it the sole operational firehouse in the district, it terminated the internship program.

Carew said he has been trying for years to resurrect the internship program under the umbrella of the volunteer association instead of the paid fire department. That goal is finally becoming a reality. And it's

costing the fire department practically nothing.

The interns pay room and board to the volunteer fire association and they cover all of their own expenses. An adult volunteer firefighter sleeps at the station five out of seven nights in case of a fire, so he can drive the truck. Interns are certified by the state to fight fires but they are not allowed to drive the truck.

As for the interns themselves, they don't see giving up dorm life for life in the fire house as a sacrifice. Sure, they mop floors, clean the bathrooms, wash the trucks, check the air packs and perform other chores, but they say it's all worth it.

UNH sophomore William Hunt sees the fire science program and the Allingtown internship as stepping stones toward his goal of being a third generation Boston firefighter.

"My dad was a firefighter. My grandfather and my uncle, too. I hope to be a paid firefighter one day," he said.

Matt Azrolan said the job has been a lifelong dream of his as well.

"Since I was a little kid, it's all I wanted," he said.

The interns sleep on bunk beds in a room tightly backed with wooden desks and dressers. When they are not doing homework, they take turns cooking dinner and cleaning up afterward. They have a 10:30 p.m. curfew and must live by strict rules laid out by the fire association. But they get to partake in the social scene on campus as well.

"We just have to be responsible. We have to make smart decisions," said Hunt. "We have to represent Allingtown in a good way. We can't give them a bad name."

Allingtown Fire Chief Peter Massaro said he is happy to have the extra help. He also noted that the program is an excellent opportunity for the interns to get hands-on experience in the field.

"When they get their degree, they have a little background too," he said.

The students said they hope that experience and a degree in fire science give them a leg up in the ultra-competitive world of applying for openings in the fire department.

UNH sophomore Ryan Litwin said he applied for a firefighter job and later found out he was up against hundreds of candidates. He didn't get the job.

"My goal is to be a career firefighter wherever I can get a job. It's so competitive now. And if you want to be an officer, you need to get a degree," he said.

Carew said students who completed past internship programs in Allingtown went on to have successful careers in the service. He wants to see more students get a shot at that kind of opportunity.

"At this stage in their life, they are willing to sacrifice to get experience. That could help them over the next 20-plus years," he said.
