

Lake Tahoe fire academy grads ready for front line

By Kathryn Reed

Steven Nichols didn't have time for graduation. He had a job to do. To fight a fire in Colorado.

But his presence was clearly felt at Lake Tahoe Basin Fire Academy's graduation June 23. He is one of 32 graduates of this year's program that is run through Lake Tahoe Community College in cooperation with the basin's various fire departments.

"This cadet will probably go on to be a fire chief," Leona Allen, one of the academy coordinators, said as she talked about Nichols and why he was receiving the leadership award.



The sixth class of the Lake Tahoe Basin Fire Academy graduates June 23. Photos/Kathryn Reed

That honor and the motivation award winners are voted on by their peers. Nichols received both awards.

This is the sixth class to graduate from the program – and the

largest. Twenty of them are from the basin, with one from Mexico and another from Germany.

Dressed in navy blue slacks, neatly pressed shirts with the academy badge, and black boots that looked shiny enough to see one's reflection in, the cadets have coalesced into a family during the past 10 months. Some look barely old enough to shave, while others are already parents. Among the 32, two are women.

Their motto as a class is – Together We Rise.

With more than 650 hours of instruction, they are ready for entry-level firefighting jobs. They've been to the top of the 100-plus foot ladder truck, in Lake Tahoe on ice (this is the only California fire academy that teaches ice water rescue), turned SUVs into convertibles on extrication day, and of course, have willingly walked into burning buildings.

A video of their 10-month journey was shown in Duke Theatre on the college campus. This gave the standing-room-only audience of friends and family a chance to see what their loved one had been enduring all this time.

While all spoke of the hard work, there was a sense of camaraderie among them that was nearly palpable.

"What a firefighter does is change the outcome," Ben Sharit, chief of the Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District, told those in attendance.

He told the cadets to keep challenging themselves, to never stop learning. He also said, once in the fire service, learning is a continual part of the job.

Sharit said there would be structures they will be asked to save and they will wonder why.

"To somebody, it's all they have," Sharit said. He said when you see the gratitude in someone's eyes it all seems

worthwhile.

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