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Chasing Fire in the Wild

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Chasing fire in the wild



At the end of most days, his face is covered in soot, his heavy yellow shirt grey and grimy, and his hair matted and sweaty from a hard hat.

But Chauncey Galletly '17, a nursing major who has spent the last five summers as a wildland firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service, wouldn't have it any other way.

On a somewhat typical day in July, Galletly sat high on a ridge near Joseph surveying the canyon after he and other firefighters contained the Cougar Ridge fire. They spotted smoke in the distance, where 100-plus degree temperatures had ignited smoldering lightning strikes from two days before.

Galletly and another firefighter hiked across the canyon, sized up the fire, contacted dispatch and gave the fire its official name – Sage Creek Fire. Galletly remained in charge for the duration, directing helicopters as they dropped water and other firefighters as they battled to contain the blaze.

"When you get thrown into that situation, you have to take care of it," he said. "No one else is there to do it. You adapt, remain calm and handle whatever comes at you. You can have the fire controlled and all of a sudden it goes haywire. It all depends on the weather."

The firefighting experience has provided a good foundation for Galletly's nursing career.

"I take my nursing experience with me in emergency situations, helping out any way I can and thinking about the next step," said Galletly, who assists EMTs on the squad. "The organizational skills I've learned from nursing help me with firefighting."

The schedule is ruthless, the days long with 14-day stints of 18-hour days, and only two days rest before returning to the lines. Brutal conditions demand firefighters push their bodies to their limits. When rugged terrain prevents access for trucks or helicopters, firefighters carry in equipment, hiking steep ravines carrying 60-pound packs, chain saws and gas containers.

Galletly's crew is based in his hometown of Enterprise, in the northeastern corner of Oregon at the edge of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area. His engine was the first on scene at the Falls Creek Fire, which ultimately grew to 500 acres. He spent part of the summer with the La Grande Hotshots, an elite 20-person crew, which fought the Blue Creek Fire outside Walla Walla, Wash., defending the water reservoir.

The danger and unpredictability of fire is something Galletly has come to respect.



Chauncey Galletly '17, a nursing major, has spent the last five summers as a wildland firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service. His tasks included directing helicopters to drop water to contain the fire.

"You never know what a fire is going to do," said Galletly, who has fought fires all over the western United States. "It can go from easy to an intense situation with little warning. We start with the heel of the fire, behind it, and come up from the back."

As a four-sport high school athlete, Galletly was initially drawn to the challenge and rigorous work of firefighting. He has discovered other benefits as well.

"I like the fact that we're doing something for people," he said. "We work hard and get to see areas of the wilderness others don't often see."

Galletly's plans for his nursing career are varied. He hopes to work in the emergency room, or perhaps as a traveling nurse or medic.

– Laura Davis