

## So, You Want to Go into Fire Protection? *By Ed Hugill*

It started with a summer job at Koorsen Fire & Security when he was sixteen years old. Two years later, my oldest son came to me and said, "I think I want to go into fire protection as my career." He knew I would soon be making a recruiting trip to Oklahoma State University to interview students for possible summer internships or full time jobs working for a distributor in the fire protection industry. My son, Eddie, asked if he could go along and check out the school and the four-year program in fire protection and safety technology. Even though this happened almost eleven years ago, it is still one of my proudest days as a dad. My son was making a commitment to go to a college far from Indiana and, even more impressive, going into a chosen field that none of his friends even knew existed.

I have now been in the fire protection industry for almost fifteen years. I am very thankful that Randy Koorsen (owner of Koorsen Fire & Security) convinced me in 1997 to leave the automotive and truck parts industry after almost twenty years. I am very concerned about the future of our industry and the number of people who even know enough about fire protection as a possible career choice. For our industry to survive and prosper, we need to lure top talent away from other industries and, even more important, convince young people to choose a career in fire protection.

The remainder of this article will focus on the challenge of getting young people to choose a career in our industry. In my current role as executive vice president of Commercial Fire, Inc., I have the privilege to work closely with many affiliate partners (fire equipment distributors) who perform national account work for us all across the country. It is very exciting for Commercial Fire to work with affiliates with second, third, or fourth generations involved in the business. Often when we travel the country to meet our affiliates, however, we ask if children or other family members are in the business and the answer is "no." The "no" answer, to us, is an alarm signal about the future leadership and ownership of fire equipment distributor businesses.



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I remember back when my son told me he thought he wanted to go into fire protection, he asked if I thought it was a good idea and if yes, why? The answers I gave him over ten years ago are still valid today. Many young people over the years have chosen to pursue desires to be a teacher, fireman, policeman, nurse, or doctor for the obvious reasons. The reasons are typically that they want to make a difference, want to protect people, and ultimately even save lives. A career in fire protection allows you the opportunity to accomplish all of these goals and help make the world safe from fire. With our current economic conditions, the financial instability of teachers, firemen, and policemen has become a deterrent to entering those fields. Careers in medicine are still very rewarding, but insurance regulations and very often large college debt have diminished the lucrative portion of those careers. Financial stability and long-term earnings potential can be an important factor in choosing fire protection as a career.

A career as a fire protection engineer, for instance, can provide a very competitive income according to a salary and benefits survey conducted by the Society of Fire Protection Engineers (SFPE) in 2010. The

median income for a fire protection engineer (four-year degree) in 2009 was \$110,500 (including bonuses and overtime pay). This amount represented a 12.5 percent increase over SFPE's 2007 data, during a time when most industries weren't raising pay. Median income for engineers with a bachelor's degree with up to six years experience was \$68,700 per year. Fire protection engineers and professionals with upwards of fifteen years experience typically earn over \$120,000 per year. The survey also found this career path provided generous benefits such as medical, dental, retirement, tuition reimbursement, and bonuses.

The last reason I gave my son for why he should choose fire protection as a career is that it is an industry as close to recession proof as you can find. Since our industry and what we do is code driven (with enforcement) instead of discretionary, and since the insurance industry supports our final product (fire life safety), it has long-term staying power.

The readership of *Firewatch!* includes fire equipment distributor (FED) owners, FED managers, FED technicians, manufacturers, wholesalers, and other vendors involved in NAFED. We all have an obligation to convince sons, daughters, grandsons,

granddaughters, children of friends, and even current employees that pursuing a degree in fire protection can be rewarding on both a personal and a financial level.

There are many four-year (bachelor) and two-year (associate) degrees available in fire protection engineering. The two best-known programs are the Fire Protection and Safety Technology bachelor's degree at Oklahoma State University and the Fire Protection Engineering bachelor's degree at University of Maryland. Eastern Kentucky also has a Fire Protection and Safety Engineering Technology four-year degree and the University of Akron (Ohio) has a degree in Fire Protection Technology.

All four of these schools have similarities in their programs, but they also focus on different specialty areas such as consulting, engineering, insurance, professional firefighting, and the traditional fire protection industry as we know it in NAFED. All of the fire protection degree programs also provide a very strong general studies focus and often allow for electives in general business studies. If you are an owner of a fire equipment distributor company and you plan on sending one or more of your children to college for a business or general studies degree and then bring them back into the business, a college offering a fire protection degree is worth a look.

If you have a child or know a young adult who has no idea what they want to do with their life or where to go to college, take the time to talk to them about our industry, the fire protection industry. I personally am very proud and glad that over ten years ago my son asked the question about fire protection as a career. Twelve years ago, what started as a summer job turned into four summers working as a technician (while attending Oklahoma State), then five years after graduation working as a project manager and sales rep at the distributor level, and now the last two years working for Janus Fire Systems as a project engineer.

Besides watching my son prosper in this industry, I have also watched my nephew, who graduated with a fire protection technology

degree from the University of Akron, become successful at Commercial Fire. Similar to my son, he worked at the distributor level as a technician, then sales, and he now manages two of Commercial Fire's largest national accounts.

My son, my nephew, and many of our affiliates' children who are in their twenties are the future of our business and, even more, our industry. The reality is that we cannot afford to wait and hope for young people to say, "I think I want to go into fire protection." Be proactive! Talk up our industry and how rewarding it can be as a career! Lastly, reward

those individuals who are passionate about this industry and who spend four years of college studying fire protection by offering jobs and opportunities with your company. ❖

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