

# Honor the Work



# Respect the Workers

## Young firefighter learns lessons at Alpha Co.

By Earliisa Granger

College is supposed to be a place where you can reinvent yourself—where the nerd becomes the intellectual, the wallflower becomes the wild child and the tuba player becomes the firefighter.

Maybe the latter is a little extreme, but during Michael Breen's freshman year he decided that he no longer wanted to devote himself to Penn State's Blue Band. He had played band all throughout high school, he said.

"I really didn't feel that that was what I was meant to do, at least with my free time," said Breen, a 22-year-old civil engineering student at Penn State.

One day he was picking up his clothes from the cleaners and a couple of fire trucks went screaming out of the garage at the fire station across the street.

"I saw that and that got the wheel turning and I picked up an application and haven't

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looked back since," Breen said.

Breen said the application process at the Alpha Company, State College's fire company on Atherton Street, was nothing strenuous. First, he completed an application and submitted it to a committee. He had to pass a criminal background check. Then the committee interviewed him. He was subsequently voted into the company for an 18-month probationary period. Then, he went through a state certification and was voted into the company as a permanent member.

As a probationary member, Breen made mistakes — not mistakes involved with fire fighting but mistakes like showing up late

for training, he said.

"These guys were taking time out of their schedule to train me and they were getting upset with me," said the Levittown native. "I feel like I've worked against that reputation. The fire company has taught me how to be a more responsible person."

He has also learned how to prioritize. He got into academic trouble because he was spending too much time at the station. He began running out of class to go on calls and ignoring his homework. He finally came to the realization that he has to be a student too.

He said his pager goes off anywhere, including in the middle of exams.

"Professors don't take very well to pagers going off. They think it's a cell phone initially," Breen said. Now, he tells the professor on the first or second day that he is a firefighter. He turns his pager down to a minimum and leaves class only when it is a major incident, he said.

His first fire happened after he was in the company almost two years. "It was scary," Breen said. "They train you. You watch the videos and talk about it all the time but when they say 'working fire,' you don't know what you're going into. I just kept my cool [and] remembered my training."

Firefighters never stop training, Breen said. "There's always something that you can learn that you didn't know before," he said. "And the day you know it all, you need to get out of the fire department."

Breen said that the benefits of being a firefighter range from the simple joy of riding around town in a fire truck to becoming an integral part of the community. Also, Breen, who lives at the station full time, takes advantage of the fire station offerings. He has access to the fire station's kitchen, gym and computer lab.

Breen works full time as an engineer at Norfolk Southern Railroad, his assignment co-op in Altoona. Through an arrangement with the railroad, he takes a semester of



Photo by Earliisa Granger

Michael Breen, an engineering student and volunteer firefighter with Alpha Company in State College, works one semester in Altoona and one semester in State College to get through school.

classes and then works a semester. Breen lives rent free at the station and does not have many bills, but is required to run fire calls while he is at the station.

"It's kind of like a dormitory," Breen said. "You have to share a shower and a bathroom with the rest of the people... But over all it's not too bad."

He also enjoys other intangible perks of being a firefighter. He loves that the firefighters are like a brotherhood, Breen said. "People will help you out," he said. "And it's not just that you run into them here at the firehouse; you run into them everywhere."

Breen, who expects to graduate in May 2007, said he would stay with the company until the day he leaves State College. However, he may not continue on as a firefighter because major cities do not have volunteer fire companies like the Alpha Company. It depends on where he settles after graduation, he said.

"But in the back of my mind, I am keeping the possibility of becoming a career firefighter," Breen said.



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