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Firefighting adds up for ex-CPA

Spreadsheet or siren? He didn't hesitate to choose the ladder

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The Arizona Republic

Oct. 8, 2004 12:00 AM

Dan Taylor navigated thick smoke as his captain, armed with a thermal imager, led him through a burning house.

Taylor couldn't see anything and struggled to keep up.

They finally reached a window and broke it open. Smoke poured out, revealing a hallway consumed with fire.

"This is awesome," Taylor said. "Then my captain said, 'OK you can put it out now.'"

For Taylor, his job as a Gilbert firefighter brings fulfillment he never found as a CPA, college professor or concert trumpet player.

Since Taylor joined the Gilbert Fire Department two years ago at 42, he's soaked in the camaraderie and relished the work more than all the jobs he's had.

Taylor, who now drives firetrucks after being promoted to engineer, recently turned 45. That makes him one of the oldest firefighters in the department.

"I get teased non-stop," he said. "It keeps me young."

In his younger days, Taylor worked construction jobs for utility companies because he enjoyed physical labor. His wife even suggested he work as a firefighter when Taylor was in his late 20s. Over a decade later, he took her advice.

Taylor earned a bachelor's degree in music education from the University of Nebraska, where he played in the marching band. Then he earned a master's degree in trumpet from Arizona State University.

During his mid-20s, Taylor scraped by as a concert trumpet player and substitute teacher, among other odd jobs.

He played the trumpet in an orchestra that he set up to play for the pope when the pontiff visited the Valley years ago.

At age 28, Taylor met his wife. They married three months after she asked him out on their first date.

"I had no money," he said. "I wasn't going to ask anybody out."

After Taylor had enough of sleeping on box springs in an apartment filled with donated furniture, he opted to give up trumpet playing for a more lucrative career

as a tax accountant.

He went back to school, earned another master's degree and passed the CPA exam on his first attempt.

Taylor worked for three different accounting firms before accepting an offer at ASU where he taught for six years.

Taylor said he often advised students to seek a profession they would truly enjoy and find interesting.

His message sunk in.

"I finally listened to myself when I was teaching," said Taylor, who realized he wanted something more than lecturing about taxes as an untenured faculty member.

After he became certified as an emergency medical technician, he applied with several fire departments and endured intense training. Taylor landed a job with the Gilbert Fire Department. Not surprisingly, he earned an associate's degree in fire science along the way.

Taylor said he's impressed with firefighters' mental prowess and the quality of work.

"These are some bright guys in the fire service," he said. "I don't think people give them enough credit."

Taylor does recognize the respect people give firefighters. He doesn't tire of elderly women who bless him in the grocery store or boys who, with eyes wide open, stare in admiration when they see him in uniform.

"That part is more impressive than I thought it would be," he said. "It's very rewarding."

Taylor coordinates the Fire Department's five-member honor guard. It traveled to Colorado Springs this month for the annual Fallen Fire Fighter Memorial Ceremony.

The honor guard joined the Gilbert Police honor guard to lead a ceremony honoring those who died in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Taylor played the national anthem on his trumpet.

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