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trial by fire

From fighting fires to teaching grammar, English teacher Elizabeth Woolley discusses her previous life as a wildland firefighter



Before Elizabeth Woolley ever started grading papers, she was fighting fires at Yellowstone National Park.

"I was finishing my English degree, and I didn't exactly know what to do," Woolley said. "I didn't want to go into teaching just yet, and I knew I wanted to get back out West, so that was my way into that."

One of the places she applied to was Cody, Wyoming where she caught the station foreman off-guard by calling him after a couple of his crew members left. And even though they had a great conversation, she was not offered the job.

Weeks later, she called again, and because another crew member had dropped out, she got the job.

"It required me to be proactive, I think, especially because I didn't have any chainsaw or fire management experience. My degree was in English and not biology or environmental science or some other field that was clearly well suited to that."

Convincing the chief to hire her was only part of the battle, though. She still had to complete a physical endurance test and her fire training.

"When you get the official go-ahead to pursue the field, you have to pass a couple of physical tests called the PAT test which required you to carry 45 pounds of weight during a three-mile walk in under 45 minutes, and if you passed that, you could continue with the training."

To prepare, Woolley took walks around the community while carrying a heavy backpack filled with textbooks.

After passing the test, the next step was completing fire training where Woolley learned how to run a chainsaw, how to dig a line, how to understand the fire triangle and how to stay safe if something happened.

"It's hard to pick out what was most notable because it was a test of endurance that lasted months. When you're a wildland firefighter, it's your life, so from May until October, there was little time off, so for me, it was a lot of physical and mental training," Woolley said.

One notable moment was when she and her crew were sent to defend a turkey farm by burning a circle around the establishment and digging fire breaks to remove the fuel.

Yet, perhaps her most meaningful experience was where she didn't fight any fires at all. During her first year in the program, her crew was sent to the New Orleans area, which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. They assisted with mostly cleanup, cutting down trees and passing out supplies.

"That was really foundational for me. To be a part of that relief and to help people recover from such a disaster, even in a small way, was pretty cool."