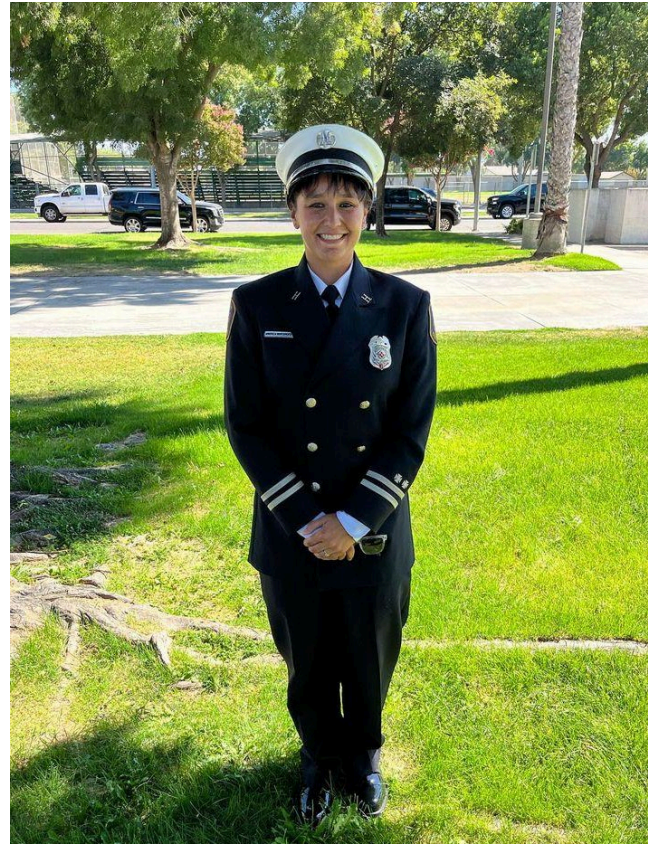


Fire Captain Got Her Start at COS in Hanford

When Andrea Nakamura's dreams of playing Division 1 college softball were dashed by a soccer injury, she had to rethink her life plan. The graduate of Redwood High School in Visalia took a gap year working in retail to earn money to pay for college. "My cousin told me about Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) careers and working for a fire department sounded really cool," said Nakamura. "I was very physically active and thought that would be an asset. I felt I'd fit in with co-workers in the traditionally male-dominated field because I grew up closer to men and had plenty of experience getting along with them."

Nakamura enrolled at College of the Sequoias, taking FIRE 159 - Introduction to Fire Protection Organizations at the Hanford campus and completing the EMT prerequisites to apply to the COS Fire Academy. Along the way, she encountered naysayers. "People asked, 'Are you sure you want to be a fire fighter and do you know how tough it is?'" said Nakamura.



Not only did Nakamura prove them wrong, she thrived in the COS Fire program. And in the ten years since graduating, she's been on a career fast track, works as a captain for the North Central Fire Protection District and has come full circle to become an instructor for the COS Fire Academy. "The instructors in the COS Fire Academy want you to succeed," said Nakamura. "I am where I am today in my career because of the faculty mentors and the really great support the COS Fire Program offered."

Rick Smith, Fire Technology Coordinator, COS, and retired Assistant Fire Chief, King County Fire Department, indicated that Nakamura made an impression from the start. "Andrea had enthusiasm and the determination to accomplish what she set out to do," said Smith. "She was always first to volunteer to try something, picked up skills quickly and was a terrific team player helping other students to succeed."

The Fire Academy is offered in the spring and is an intensive 15-unit program slightly longer than the typical semester, explained Smith. "It is very fast-paced and some students struggle to keep up," said Smith. "Those who do

their homework, practice the skills, come early and prepare for class do best in the program. To be a firefighter requires drive and self-motivation as well as a spirit of cooperation to accomplish tasks as a team.”

It took Nakamura two and a half years to complete the prerequisites, academy and Associate of Science degree in Fire Technology. “The instructors in the academy were so interesting because they shared their practical knowledge and real world experience,” said Nakamura. “During my second year at COS, I volunteered with the Tulare County Fire Department. I got started with the State of California CalFire while I finished my degree and continued with them after graduation.”

Nakamura indicated that the old adage that "firefighting is the best job in the world" has been true for her. "Every day is exciting and I always look forward to coming to work," said Nakamura. "It keeps me on my toes as I never know what I'll be called on to do. I might have to break a window to get someone out of a car or provide Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) to someone's grandma. I get such a feeling of gratification and accomplishment from my job."



Staying fit is part of what she likes about her career. “I have to carry about 150 pounds of gear so physical fitness is a big part of my life,” said Nakamura. “Some people are initially skeptical that I have the stamina to do my job until I prove myself. I work hard to demonstrate to new people that I can drive the engine, handle the physical requirements and can do the tasks better than them.”

She says that the fire department culture suits her. “It is a paramilitary organization so you follow orders and respond respectfully with ‘yes, sir or yes, ma’am,’” said Nakamura. “You have to keep your ego out of it and work together to perform the rescue. The crew is like my family and I know I can rely on them. I really enjoy helping people as well as learning from and teaching others every day.”

After four years with CalFire, Nakamura joined the North Central Fire Protection District (NCFP) that covers 230 square miles bordering the City of Fresno. Over the course of four years with NCFP, she has been promoted twice to her current position as captain.

One of the projects she enjoys is participating with the Fresno City Women’s Empowerment Camp. “On a Saturday, we give high school girls a taste of what we do on the job as firefighters,” said Nakamura. “I want to open their eyes and show them that females can excel at this job.”

According to Smith, she is also a role model at the COS Academy. “Andrea is an agent of change and helps students see themselves in this profession,” said Smith. “Her wisdom and experiences are invaluable to students in navigating any resistance they encounter. She instills the confidence in young women that they can overcome hurdles and have a very rewarding career.”

Smith is passionate about sharing the opportunities in firefighting careers. “Firefighting is a great career and there is a place for everybody,” said Smith. “Where else can you work 110 days each year, earn excellent pay and great benefits, and have such a satisfying job that you wake up every morning wanting to do it all over again?”

The COS Fire Program can support people at different stages of their careers. “You don’t need a degree to start in an entry level position in the fire service,” said Smith. “For most agencies, minimum requirements are completion of Fire Fighter 1 Academy and EMT training. Our COS Fire Academy certification is accepted anywhere in the country.”

The Associate of Science in Fire Technology degree is often needed for advancement, explained Smith. “We have many current firefighters in our degree program,” said Smith. “If you’ve just graduated from high school, it would make sense to complete your degree as well as the academy. The degree will make you a more qualified candidate and eligible for advancement later.”

Nakamura indicated that teaching at COS has been very rewarding. “I got so much help and encouragement from the instructors at the COS Fire Academy, and now I can offer that same guidance and support to those who are green,” said Nakamura. “I especially want the female students to gain the confidence that they can do this. To be successful, you have to have a strong drive to want to do better. It is a wonderful career to be surrounded by people who are passionate about helping others.”