

A CLIMB TO THE TOP

Adrenaline rush still pushes Davenport fire captain



Brandenburg juggles volunteer duties, a full-time job and family life.

By TRACIE WHITE
Sentinel staff writer

THE 911 calls come in any time of the day or night: dead body sighted on beach; fishermen lost at sea; injury accident on Highway 1; man stranded on cliff; shark attack.

And Margaret Brandenburg responds, day or night.

Usually, it's night.

In three or four minutes, she's driven the few blocks from her Davenport home to the Davenport Fire Station; parked her Toyota Camry, unlocked the fire station door, pulled on a pair of yellow overalls sitting ready in the hallway and backed the rescue unit out onto the road.

Heart pumping; adrenaline flowing.

She's done this day and night, year after year and, like her co-workers, she does this for free. Brandenburg doesn't bowl or sew or play golf. Her hobby, what she does in her spare time, is save people's lives.

There was a time, Brandenburg said, over the nine years that she's volunteered with the Davenport fire department, when she considered herself what firefighters call an "adrenaline junkie."

"You can get wired and enjoy the high," she said thoughtfully, resting her head in her hand.

'They say I can be rather loud and obnoxious when I need to be. ... Somebody has to seize the situation and get it under control.'

— Margaret Brandenburg

Dressed in a T-shirt and blue jeans, she was seated on a couch at the fire station on a Saturday morning relaxing after a call (non-injury accident). "You feel like you're doing battle; you're fighting death. Fighting it tooth and nail with every ounce."

Of course, it's not always like that. Especially now that Brandenburg — a 42-year-old full-time nurse and single mother of two — is fire captain, a position that she was voted into by her fellow volunteer firefighters. There's the paperwork and the bureaucracy to battle and, like always, the endless drunk calls to respond to.

But every once in awhile, there's a call that gets that old adrenaline flowing.

Brandenburg pauses, sifting through the memories of the countless calls she's responded to over the years, searching for the

right one, her face flushed. Finally, she finds it.

It was one of her first calls. A man fell off a nearby cliff and washed up on the beach. "It was awful," she said, remembering the narrow ledge that she had to inch out along, 80 feet above the sea. When she got to the victim, it was clear he was having trouble breathing. He was near drowning. She stabilized his head and back, using a cervical collar and rolling him onto a backboard, then hauled him up the cliff with the help of other firefighters.

"Two weeks later there was a knock on my door," Brandenburg said. "An elderly gentlemen wanted to thank me for saving his son's life. He walked out of the hospital fine."

CALM AND COOL in the face of calamity, that's how Brandenburg. Please see VOLUNTEER — D2

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Brandenburg's co-workers describe her. A leader, someone who takes control.

"I'd stand alongside her in any emergency," said Frank Hutchinson, a Big Creek Lumber employee who volunteered for the Davenport fire department 11 years before retiring last year. "She's got a cool head. She's not perfect," he added. "She has a wicked temper if you cross her. She'll yell; she'll scream; but she's real good about holding it until you get back."

He paused, changed the tone of his voice. Of course, he said, "You can't fault anybody that will get up at midnight and then at 3 o'clock in the morning to chase a drunk."

"She's a whirlwind," said Michael Magill, 32, Brandenburg's live-in boyfriend and a fellow firefighter. The couple met at the fire station. Both were new volunteers when they went out together on their first call in 1983. "For some people that's kind of hard. For one thing, she's a woman; the fire service, it's definitely a good old boys club; she looks like a gentle person, and people take her for granted. She'd ask a few of the guys to do something, and sometimes they'd ignore her."

"That's when she would get a little loud. Everybody's caught off guard. Her voice will go shrill for just an instant." It works though, he said, laughing. Oh yeah, it works.

Brandenburg laughs too.

"They say I can be rather loud and obnoxious when I need to be. It certainly gets their attention. Somebody has to seize the situation and get it under control."

THAT'S WHAT Brandenburg did 13 years ago when, as a mother of two young children going through a divorce with no money and little education, she moved to Davenport. After working as a nurse's aid for \$3.75 an hour, she decided to be a welfare mother and go back to school.

"I moved into that little gray house," Brandenburg said, pointing out the window of the fire station. "I was not used to being single. Every moment could be terrifying." She was 29. Her marriage had lasted 10 years.

"I was raised you get married, you stay married," she said. "I had a lot of anger. It fed me."

In 1983, Brandenburg completed school and went to work as a nurse. At 33, she got a job at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center where she still works full time. She volunteered for the fire department when she got out of school, hoping to get experience for her nursing career. She didn't plan on staying long.

That was almost 10 years ago.

"It's been everything I thought it would be, and then some," she said. "It disrupts your whole life. When I was a kid, it was totally inconceivable that I would be doing this."

But the work is addicting, despite the drawbacks, she said.

And there are drawbacks.

"We do body recovery," Brandenburg said. "There's not a beach near here I haven't picked up a body." She remembers one body, in particular, that stuck with her, its image seared onto her brain.

"Everything was intact when we found him. His jeans were fine, his Casio watch was fine. His face was missing. I finally had to tell him to go away, go away."

The tough calls stay with you a long time, she said.

"Like when we lost that little Korean boy and his father." The two had had gone fishing and were washed out to sea by the surf. Emergency crews were called in to search for the bodies. "The chopper was running low," she said. "I had left adults in the water before, but never a child. I didn't want to do that. If you don't find them that day, they go down forever."

WITH THE increasing number of dual-income families, it's getting more difficult to find and keep volunteer firefighters, said Dan Turner, division chief for the California Division of Forestry, contracted by the county to administer the fire department. "There's

a lot of pressures on volunteers these days," he said. "The training requirements are astronomical."

"They're a special breed," said Turner. "They have all the same duties as other firefighters, they're just not paid. Rappelling over a 300-foot cliff is not something everyone would want to do."

Brandenburg's children are grown now. Sam, 21, lives in a studio apartment attached to his mother's home and works at Big Creek Lumber. Rebekke, 15, is a student at Santa Cruz High School.

"I don't think they'll ever be volunteer firefighters because they've felt the crunch," Brandenburg said. "Thanksgiving dinners can be kind of boring, holidays are not necessarily family times. The emphasis is on the fire department. The time it takes away from home is frustrating."

Volunteer firefighters responded to 1,600 emergency calls in Santa Cruz County last year, Turner said. Included in that number were 619 fires, 717 medical emergencies, 89 hazardous material calls and two shark calls.

Brandenburg responded to both of the shark calls.

"Eric (Larsen) was truly amazing," she said. "A person clearly responsible for his own survival."

He fought the shark and got himself up to the beach. I was one of the first to arrive with CDF. There were four of us. It was July 1. I remember because I was about to go to Costco to buy steak for the Fourth of July."

Larsen was attacked about 20 yards off shore. He retrieved his board, paddled in, worked his way along the sand and crawled up the beach before collapsing and calling for help.

"He had the situation pretty much under control by the time we got there, considering how severe it was," she said.

Brandenburg's list of 911 calls she's responded to seems to go on forever. She knows the coastline inside and out, learned rappelling, uses CPR, stops blood flow and knows how to take control in all kinds of tense situations.

Rarely, she said, has she panicked.

But there was one time.

"I panicked at my own son's accident," she said. "He had his license six months. He was driving too fast at Four Mile (Beach). He said he rolled four times. My pager goes off. When I get there and see him, the look on his face was like 'Oh, she's going to kill me.'"

"I sat down and cried."



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Davenport volunteer fire Captain Margaret Brandenburg gets a hand from fellow volunteers Philip Arro and Mike Magill.