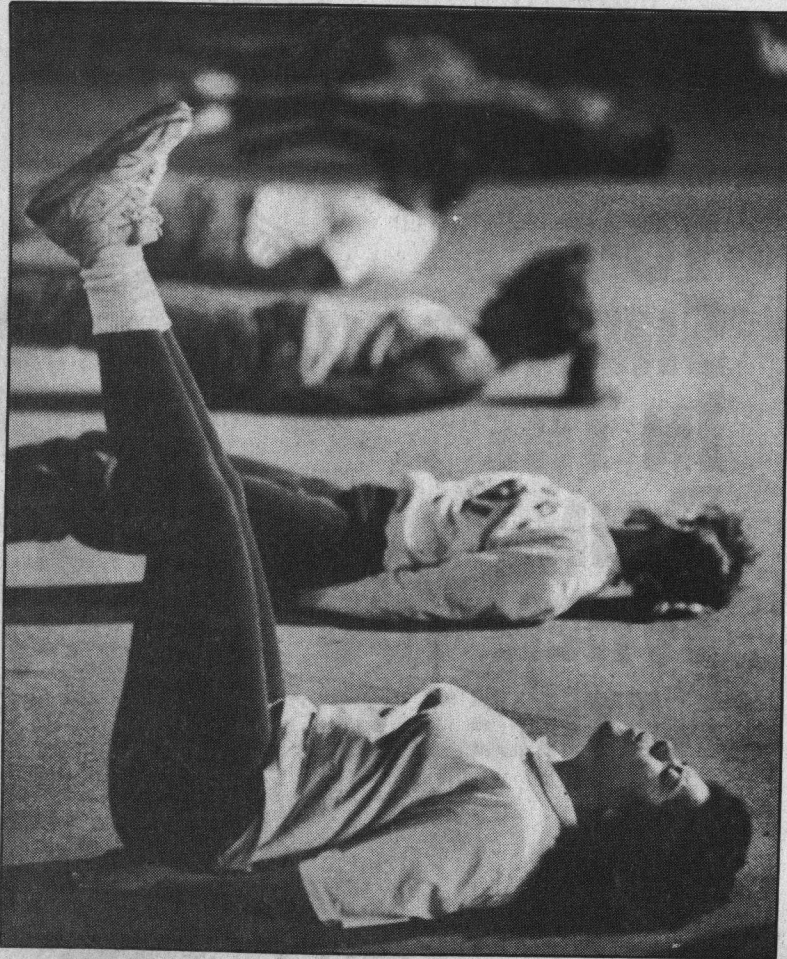
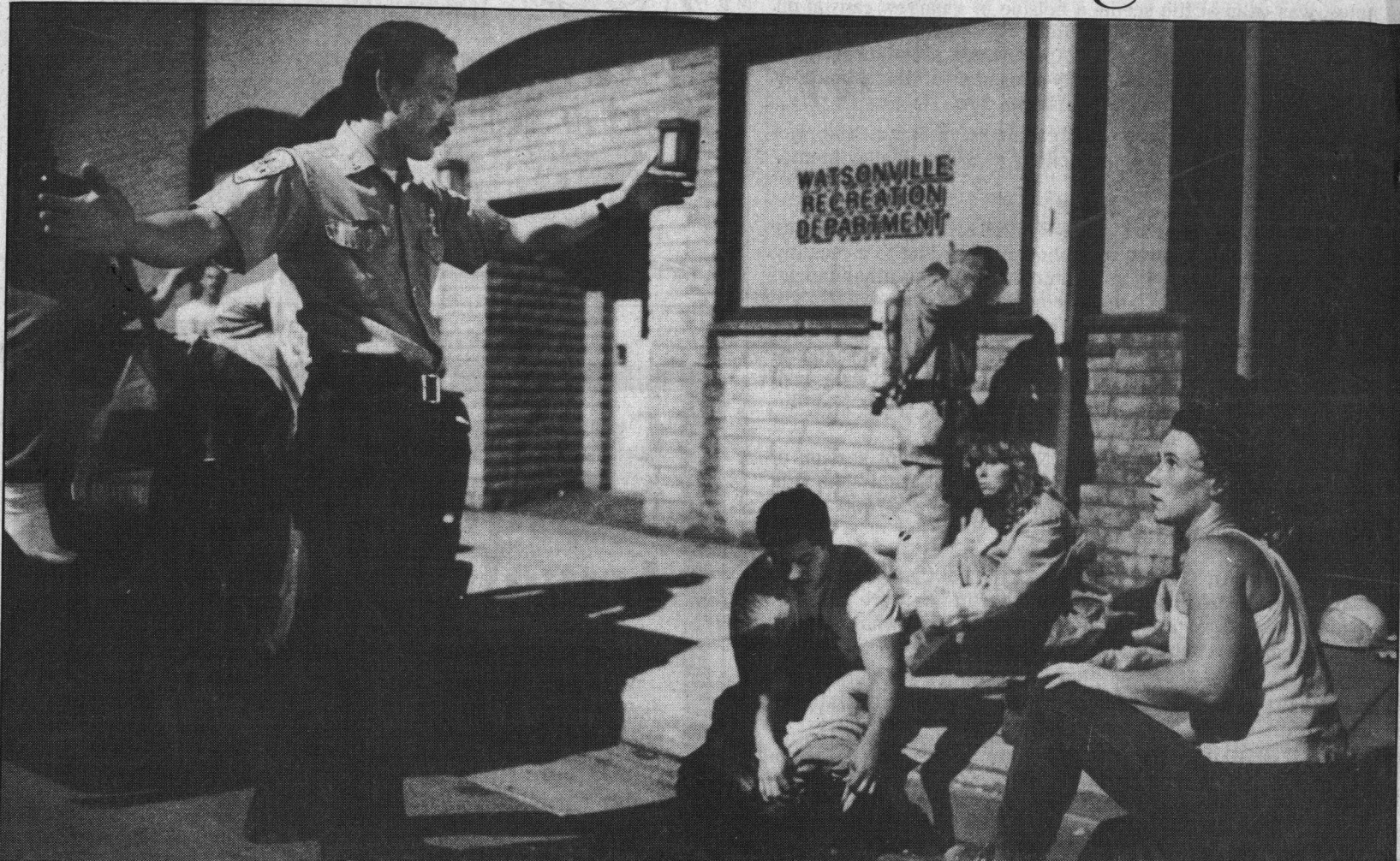


Living

Trainees sweat it out to become firefighters



Patricia Evans does calisthenics in class.



By CANDACE ATKINS
LIVING PAGE EDITOR

PAULINE HENRY SIGHS a happy, heavy sigh when asked about the firefighter training she completed this week through Watsonville Fire Department.

"I knew it would be difficult," she said, "It was. It was 65 to 75 percent physical training. You had to run, pull hoses — lift very heavy things. Very heavy things. But I'm lots stronger now. I'm incredibly strong."

Henry, single and 22, is a diet aide at Watsonville Hospital, but hopes one day to become a firefighter recruit. She is one of five women and 59 men who started a 14 week program that Watsonville Fire Captain Dave Kikuchi said was designed to help people qualify for the rigorous physical requirements and get them prepared for the written and oral tests given to department applicants who pass the physical agility exam.

"We were eliminating too many good candidates with the physical test," Kikuchi said. "So we decided to offer this training."

Patricia Evans, 26, completed all but the last two classes. At the end of the training, an old back problem became worse, and she had to stop. But she enjoyed the classes, which met three times weekly, so she attended as an observer.

I love all of those people," she said. "And I was the slowest one. In the running, I could not get it down. We had to run a mile in less than 13 minutes. My first time was 18 minutes. Some

of the guys (trainees) would run it in nine minutes, so they'd come back and run the last lap with me, telling me I could make it. Finally, I did. I ran it in 12 minutes and 13 seconds, or something like that. I was so happy."

Both women said the male trainers and students were without bias.

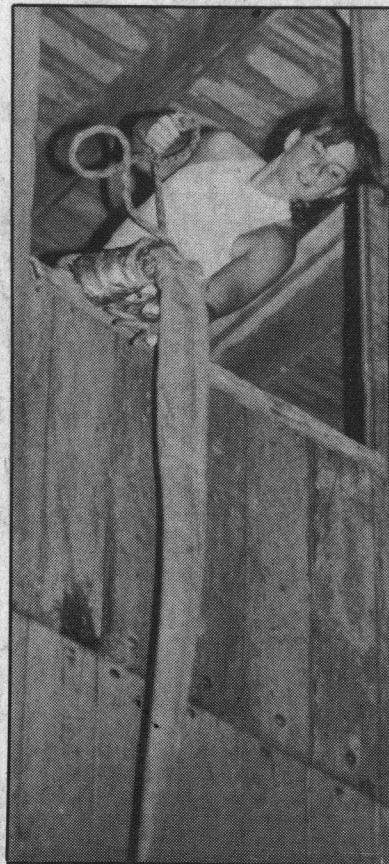
"We were a real cohesive group," Henry said. "They were good to us women, but they didn't cut us any slack. They'd never say, 'Here, let me do that for you.' But they were gentlemen, and we worked as a team."

Kikuchi said that's just what the department had hoped for. Staff turnover is slow in firefighting, but there are retirements, disability leaves and promotions that do create openings Kikuchi said could be filled by qualified women and men who, for lack of conditioning, were previously disqualified for the written and oral tests, because they failed the physical agility qualifications.

Throughout the training, which he acknowledged was rigorous, Kikuchi said fire department staff observed and evaluated every participant. Those who weren't keeping up were given the chance to do extra work in order to meet the standards. Some were able to do it, others couldn't and dropped out.

Most of the participants were working people who spent two nights a week and all day Saturdays at the training. They represented a cross-section of oc-

Dave Kikuchi explains procedure to, from left, Nick Araiza, Tomasann Miller and Rebecca Carnahan.



Christy Luederitz in a hose tower pull drill.

cupations, including carpenters, plumbers, clerks and laborers. Most were in their 20s (the minimum age requirement is 18), and there was a mix of singles and married people.

Once participants pass the physical certification test, which will be given today, they become eligible to apply for a spot as a reserve firefighter, a paid, on-call position. Right now, Kikuchi said there are between 11 and



Rebecca Carnahan, left, helps Tomasann Miller with breathing equipment.

15 openings in WFD.

After serving as a reserve firefighter for a year, an individual becomes eligible to apply for a permanent position. Some have waited up to eight years for the opportunity, he said.

Others, like Evans, also apply to other fire departments. Evans said it's been her dream to become a firefighter for the California Department of Forestry.

"I've always wanted an outdoor job," she said. She added that as a teenager, she worked for the Youth Conservation Corps and felt such work was her calling.

"But," she said, "I got married instead. I never got the chance to do that."

Now, as a single parent with a 6-year-old daughter, she says she just might when her injury

heals.

Henry agrees that firefighting gets in the blood, and maybe in her case, the genes. One of her six brothers is a firefighter, her father was a volunteer firefighter and her grandfather was fire chief of Freedom Fire Department in the 1950s.

"I'm looking into this full time," she said. "It's up my alley. I'm going to go with it."