



*Dian Smith, Branciforte's newest paid firefighter.*

## Fire Engine's Siren Is Like Music To Her Ears

By MARK BERGSTROM  
Sentinel Staff Writer

Nero may have fiddled while Rome Burned, but Dian Smith vows to put down her saxophone and pull on her boots and helmet and run for the Branciforte fire engine any time an alarm comes in.

Smith began work Friday as Branciforte Fire District's first, paid female firefighter.

It's a part-time job for Smith, who will be on duty every third night from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. at the station.

In her off hours, Smith is a student in the fire science and Emergency Medical Technician programs at Cabrillo College and is a baritone sax player for two local bands, the Cool Jerks and Mizguided.

Smith, who previously worked as a contract firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service and as a seasonal firefighter with the state Department of Forestry, is taking the courses at Cabrillo with an eye to a future full-time job as a firefighter.

The part-time job with Branciforte, she believes, is an excellent opportunity for on-the-job training while she completes her courses.

Her part-time job also is an excellent opportunity for the small, rural fire district to have somebody on duty at the station at all times.

The district, according to Chief Dale Thomas, employs three part-

time firefighters to rotate the night shift.

Thomas and Assistant Chief Gerald Gouin man the station during business hours Mondays through Fridays.

Thomas, Gouin and the three night firefighters are responsible for first response to all fire and medical emergency calls. The rest of the department is comprised of volunteers who respond from home or their workplace.

In addition to being responsible for getting the fire engine to the scene of an emergency during her shift, Smith will perform routine maintenance chores around the station.

"One reason I've wanted to work at a small, rural firehouse," says Smith, "is a better opportunity for experience using all of the equipment."

Smith wants to be an engineer, in fire language a firefighter who drives the engine and operates the pumps.

"Engines are like music," she says, "They have their own song. The challenge is to keep them in tune."

Thomas says Smith is typical of the kind of person the district seeks for part-time employment. "We want someone who has a future in the fire service." In return, he says, Branciforte Fire offers the opportunity for the up-and-comer to gain experience and polish the skills he or she has learned in fire technology courses.

Smith is not Branciforte's first female firefighter, says Thomas.

The district previously had three women on its volunteer roster.

Other women currently are working in the fire service in Santa Cruz County. Pam Dewey and Joan Elliot are inspectors with the county Fire Marshal's Office and are volunteers with the Soquel and Felton fire departments, respectively. In addition, women serve as volunteers with several other fire districts in the county.

The Santa Cruz Fire Department recently had a female firefighter, Tracy Johnson, as part of a work experience program. Johnson currently is on that department's hiring list, waiting for an opening in the department.

Other women have been employed with the Department of Forestry as seasonal firefighters.

Breaking into fire department ranks, however, has not generally been easy for women. Their numbers remain few in departments throughout the state.

Probably the biggest reason, says Smith, is that the job is physically demanding, thus the agility tests given as part of the hiring tests are rugged.

Women can pass those tests, Smith knows, but she believes being able to carry 130 pounds on your back is not a task many are prepared to do.

Smith is prepared and she keeps in shape by jogging three miles per day. "That's 26 laps around the firehouse," says Thomas, who already has figured that out for his new firefighter.