



Top of the Ladder: Brad Lopez goes from volunteer firefighter to fire chief

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Brad Lopez's career started with a buzzer.

He was a high school student in 1992, and like a lot of high school students, he had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. He'd been in Winters half of his life — the other half he lived with his mom in Vacaville where he watched two of his cousins live the life of public service: One as a police officer, the other as a firefighter.

He thought about joining the military, but something about being a firefighter kept calling to him. That something might have been his mom and cousins who kept pushing him to check out the local fire department. Back then it was as simple as walking up

to the local firehouse, then located at 10 Abbey Street, and introducing yourself.

So that's what he did.

"I walked in the door and rang the buzzer," Lopez recalled in an interview last week. "And I said: Hey I'm interested in becoming a volunteer. I don't know much about it, but I want to learn more."

Ron Karlen, then a fire captain with the agency, sat Lopez down. He explained that in Winters, most people get their start as a volunteer firefighter. If that's what Lopez wanted to do, the agency would be glad to have him. Lopez signed up, working for six months under then-Winters Fire Chief David Kidder

and Assistant Fire Chief Scott Dozier, all the meanwhile putting himself through school at nearby Solano Community College.

“I soon realized that was something I wanted to pursue,” Lopez said of being a firefighter. “I realized that was what I wanted to do as my career, and I stuck with it.”

To say he stuck with it is an understatement: Lopez has worked for the Winters Fire Department for 27 years, touching nearly every aspect of the agency. He helped start the Fire Explorer’s program that offers high school seniors very basic firefighter training. He’s managed the volunteer firefighter program. He’s gone out on calls, handled the administrative side — you name it, he’s done it.

His love for the agency pushed him to do better, even while juggling the responsibilities of being a young father and husband (his first daughter was born when he was 18). He obtained his bachelor’s degree in 2010 — nearly two decades after starting as a firefighter — because he said that’s what he needed to do in order to move up within the agency.

“That was kind of a marking point for me in my career that I wanted to move up and be a part of something bigger in the organization,” Lopez said.

His career took another turn in mid-2017 when city officials decided not to renew a personnel-sharing agreement with the nearby Dixon Fire Department, an arrangement that saw the two cities sharing a single fire chief. After six years of the arrangement, Winters was ready for a fire chief of their own, and they had three outstanding candidates to choose from: Art Mendoza, Matt Schechla and Lopez.

Each man was given the opportunity to serve as interim fire chief four months out of the year. At the end of the process, the three were interviewed and evaluated. Last month, city officials selected Lopez to fill the role permanently.

“There was never a sense of competition,” Lopez said. “One of the benefits is the city gets out of us is they get to keep all of us. At the end of the day, they get to keep the history, the strengths, the values we

bring to the department and the community, and we have the opportunity to move this department in a direction that it needs to go to meet the needs of the community.”

For the Winters Fire Department, that means continuing to embrace the mostly-volunteer aspect of the agency: A small town only has so much money to go around, and there’s nowhere near enough to bring on all the personnel it takes to run a fire department full-time. The role of volunteers is critical to the fire agency, and Lopez does not shy away from this fact.

“We’re primarily a volunteer fire department, and without their support and their help, we cannot do what we do today,” Lopez said. “We cannot staff an engine and respond to the emergency calls that we do.”

Recruiting volunteers is critical, and Winters has a lot to offer in that regard: One thing the department offers to volunteer firefighters is a world-class training program that gives prospective firefighters hands-on experience on different emergency scenarios — from medical calls in the city to water rescues in the nearby creek. But at a recent strategic planning workshop, City Manager John Donlevy said that kind of training program has made the city a “victim of our own success” because outside agencies like CAL FIRE hire away volunteers during peak fire seasons.

How to manage that problem is now largely up to Lopez to figure out: He agreed that the staffing shortages around peak fire season sometimes creates a pinch within the department, but said the agency usually comes up with ways to deal with it.

“We are able to manage and fill those gaps,” Lopez said. “Sometimes that means working extra hours or providing extra coverage or filling those gaps with other volunteers, and some of that means recruiting more.”

Recruiting more volunteers has its own set of challenges.

“Twenty years ago, people would join [the volunteer program] as a sort of social club,” Lopez recalled. “It

was an opportunity for families to get together in a social environment.”

But those days are largely gone: People don’t have to join a social club anymore. There’s also the time commitment involved in remaining active as a volunteer firefighter — one that, Lopez said, some might find difficult to manage along with their jobs and responsibilities as parents.

“The volunteers that we have today, the majority of them are pursuing this as a career field,” Lopez said. “They’re here for a short period of time — they come in, they get experience, they obtain their certifications that they need and then they go off and get a job somewhere else.”

That could have been Lopez: He could have been one of those firefighters who started a volunteer, learned everything he needed to know and then moved on — maybe go back to Vacaville, or join an agency in a larger city, or leave the fire department altogether and move into another career like teaching (he actually does this already: Along with his job as fire chief, Lopez teaches fire safety at Solano Community College).

So why did he stay?

It might have to do with something he didn’t have as the only child of a single mother, something he found almost instantly within the Winters Fire Department.

“The fire department for me was kind of the big brother or fatherly figure I needed growing up,” Lopez said. “It provided me some good values and guidance which I kind of stuck with.”

Within the walls of the Winters Public Safety Facility is a bond amongst staff: an unlimited support system and unconditional love that helps everyone get through the good times and bad. That bond has served Lopez well during his 27-year career as a firefighter — one that will continue for at least a decade more in his role as chief before he retires.

For him, it was never a question about whether he’d stay, but why he would ever want to leave.

“This is our second family, and this is our second home,” Lopez said. “We bicker like brothers and sisters at times because we spend a tremendous amount of time with each other, but I think one of the most-rewarding and humbling things is you come across such wonderful people in this profession. The opportunity to meet great people...it may sound cliché, but it really is the best job in the world.”

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