

## Rhode Trip

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Fire District stands alone, with one station, but helps out the nearby Union Fire District when needed.

It's nothing new. The URI station has been in existence for eighty-six years, founded on Friday, July 13, 1923. Since then, hundreds of young people have come through the firehouse doors, getting an education in academics and something extra.

Among the former students who can't cut the umbilical hose are DeGrave, who works as a special investigator for the state on disability compliance issues, and Paul Ayers, a 2005 grad and product manager at American Power Conversion.

And then there are those who are following a family tradition. Rob Erskine is a twenty-one-year-old film and theater major who shows me a terrific video he's made using footage from fire calls. His dad had been here as a student and a firefighter. Inside his room at the station is an Engine 8 emblem his father gave him. For a time, young Erskine lived in a room here that his dad occupied many years ago. And making that small world yet smaller: The elder Erskine was current Chief Barrington's roomie.

The fire station is a typical one, loaded with high-end gear and sparkling red trucks. And it's like a totally atypical college dorm: It's clean, vacuumed and tidied daily, and conspicuously absent of beer.

On the walls are framed displays of patches of former URI student firefighters, people who've gone on to the New York City Fire Department, or Providence or Boston or Canada or Germany or Thailand or the military. This is a small-town volunteer fire department in America's smallest state that just happens to turn out world-class firefighters.

I ask Barrington if he finds it amazing that these are kids doing a man's job. He says no.

"You think, 'Well, they're just kids,' but so is the basketball team," he says. "And six thousand people a night show up to see what they do."

Ayers shows up at the station on his off nights just because. So do others. DeGrave says the reason is simple.

"You ask many of these guys if they'd want to be a full-time, paid firefighter and they'd say no," he says. "They do it for free because they love it." **R**

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## Burning to Learn

The town of Kingston relies on an unusual volunteer fire force: It's made up mostly of URI students. And while they may be young, they're professional to the cinders.

ORDINARILY, I DON'T LIKE YOUNG PEOPLE driving vehicles I'm in or playing with matches around me, but there are always exceptions.

"This one handles like a Caddy compared to the last one," claims Rob Johnson, twenty years old, when I ride with him on Engine 8, a gigantic, gleaming red, brand-new \$400,000 fire truck. He should know; he handles it like a pro, which he is. And just to prove it, tonight he and others will set fire to things. I'll watch happily. It's training night at one of the country's most unusual fire stations.

Inside a concrete "burn building" in South Kingstown, a bunch of guys set ablaze some wooden pallets, cranking up the smoke and heat to a degree I've never seen before. Safely embraced in high-tech firefighting gear, I watch from up close and personal. A billowing blanket of golden flames licks the ceiling above me in a roiling wave, looking like molten candy and generating heat upwards of 800 degrees Fahrenheit. Then it is destroyed in a hissing blast of water.

"What did you think?" asks a sweaty Chris DeGrave, a twenty-four-year-old URI grad who is now a resident lieutenant at the station, as he hands me a bottle of water.

I pull off my air mask and look around at the group of ten guys gathered in the misty smoke outside the burn building on a Friday night when virtually everyone else their age is out chugging beer. They're chugging water.

What do I think? I'm old enough to be their father and think how their real ones must be proud as hell.

I mean, really, think about it: The Kingston Fire District's sole station, in the belly of the URI campus, is largely in the hands of a bunch of URI students and recent grads who are all volunteers. They are the station, or roughly 30 percent of it, kids as young as eighteen putting their lives on the line. There are some older volunteers here, too, retired firefighters from elsewhere or former students from many years ago. But for the most part, the young guys run the show.

There are other situations similar to this in the country, but none quite like it. Other stations are headed by career firefighters or chiefs. Not here at URI. Here it's all volunteer, all the time, right up to the chief, Nate Barrington, who earned an MBA from

URI back in the day and is now a physician's assistant at Roger Williams Medical Center. He technically earns a stipend for being chief, but considering the many hours he puts in, the per-hour breakdown hardly buys the pizza they occasionally feast on here.

"I've been chief since 1991," Barrington says. "And the caliber of kids I've seen is unchanged; they're focused, dedicated and determined."

The URI students train hard, and have up to a year to get up to snuff before taking their turn as one of the twelve firefighters that live at the station instead of in the dorms. Here, rent is covered but they're on call around the clock. When something happens on campus or in town, or within a several-mile radius in South Kingstown, they show up. The Kingston || CONTINUED ON PAGE 95



Illustration by Matt Vincent