

Bend Up Close: Fire Chief Larry Langston

by K_Guice

In college, Fire Chief Larry Langston had dreams of becoming a teacher. He attended Colorado State University as an undergraduate and graduate student where he earned his degree in biology.

Just as he planned, he taught high school biology and coached the wrestling and baseball teams. However, at the age of 21, a new interest began to take root, an interest in fire fighting.

“I spent five summers in Montana fighting wild-land fires while I was in college and after college, so I developed an interest through that,” Langston said.

Fire Chief Larry Langston It was a trip to Alaska with a teaching friend that sealed his fate. While on the trip, he fell in love with the area and decided to make his move.

It was there that he officially joined the fire service. “I enjoyed teaching, but my real passion has certainly been the fire service,” he said.

At the age of 28, he walked away from a secure job and ventured into the unknown.

“My introduction into the fire service was through the paramedic side,” he said.

His position was a new frontier for firefighters. “We were the first group of paramedics up in that state,

which was in 1972," Langston said.

While there had been emergency medical technicians, no one at the time provided on-scene advanced life support as one would commonly expect on an accident scene today.

"With the building of the Alaska pipeline and the activity of that, we were the first group to provide that kind of care outside of the hospital," he added.

During that time, Langston's group was one of a handful of paramedic systems as compared to the 20,000-plus found throughout the United States today.

While everyone saw them on the cutting edge, he says most were just crossing their fingers that they could provide that kind of care.

"We did okay," he laughed. "It was a trial period gaining the confidence of the physicians that firefighters could do that kind of care outside of the hospital."

That was the beginning of a 22-year-long career in Alaska that ended with him being named one of the youngest fire chiefs. "I was 38 when I became fire chief in Anchorage," he said.

It wasn't an easy role to step into. "Fire fighters are a very bright, high energy, dedicated group of men and women. In order to gain their trust, it is a real effort and things have to be done consistently right," he said.

With many men working under him who were much older, Langston said he just did the best job he could do to try and earn their respect.

“A lot of command officers fail,” he said. “There is a very high turnover of fire chiefs. I believe the length is about three to four years.”

Twenty years later, in the same role, he says he has his father to thank for his endurance and success.

“I have been fortunate that my father was actually my early mentor and I think what I learned from dad was the importance of building relationships,” Langston said.

“The human side of the business is more important than any other aspect, more important than the operations or the financial management,” he said. “The people side of the work is where many fire chiefs seem to fail.”

In his forties, Langston and his wife Jane started thinking about the future. “We started looking at towns we would like to move to some day,” he said.

After two decades, the long winters were becoming too much. “We narrowed our search down to 10 cities and visited them one-by-one,” he said.

As with his visit to Alaska in his twenties, Langston and his wife fell in love with Bend at first sight. "It was a great connection for both of us! so, we bought a house."

"I competed for the fire chief position and fortunately, I got it," he laughed. "This is my 14th year as the fire chief in Bend," he added.

At this point in his career, his attention has turned towards mentoring.

"I spend a lot of my time talking to young command officers about how to make decisions and the importance of management philosophies that build trust," he said.

Langston hopes to help them as they grow, but he admits they teach him along the way too.

"I've learned to have absolute respect for them as individuals; no matter their age, if they're right out of college or if they have been working in those stations for 25 years," he said.

"Each and every one, are the kind of individuals that do not hesitate to put other people in front of themselves and that is an unusual trait to have," Langston said.

He also attributes them as the reason for his never ending enthusiasm for his job. "Even after all of these years, just being around it's contagious," he said.

That may explain why his 16-year-old son Neal is now contemplating a career as a firefighter. “He is talking about it and I hope he does,” Langston said.

“I watch what happens with people,” he said. “The satisfaction they gain, how their families support them, the way their families develop, become part of the community and the relationships they have with other fire firefighters.”

“It is a wonderful brotherhood,” he said with pride.

That family unit is Langston’s other great passion in life. His son, Neal and 23-year-old daughter, Nanette are his ultimate pride and joy.

“I don’t have a lot of other things that I do other than family and work,” he said. “Because of my son’s involvement in sports I have given up golf and I will probably start again after he graduates.”

However, just as it is in work, the people in his life are the priority. “With the limited time I have to spend outside of work, the only way I want to spend it is with family,” he said.

That is something that has become even more important as he and his kids have gotten older.

“When Nanette went off to college, I actually had to close the door to her room, I just couldn’t look into it,” he said.

“I just felt so lonely after she was gone and that has made these years so important with Neal,” he said. “I know things will be changing soon.”

In a couple years, Langston says another big change is on the horizon. “My wife and I are looking forward to my retirement,” he said.

“It’s not too far off, though I haven’t set a date yet,” Langston laughed. “At 60 you begin thinking that if you stay much longer other opportunities will be lost.”

While the couple plans to stay in Bend and renovate their home, they also hope to travel, do volunteer work and have some fun.

“I have a cabin in the Dakotas! so, I am going to spend some time up there in the fall bird hunting,” he said. “And I love the Rockies. We will probably do a lot of hiking.”

As he always has, he plans to continue helping others in need.

“We have a family foundation called the Langston foundation,” he said. “I had a wealthy uncle who set it up to give money to non-profit organizations and I will get involved in the management of that.”

Laughing he said, “Looks like I will have my plate full.”

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