Most people run from burning buildings.
Volunteer firefighters run in—for free.

BY DIANE VETO PARHAM | PHOTOS BY MIC SMITH
It was the real deal last June, when South Lynches firefighters responded to a warehouse fire at East Coast Erosion Blankets in Lake City, where millions of pounds of stored straw bales caught fire. The alarm sounded shortly before 9 a.m. on a Friday. Within five minutes, the first volunteers were on the scene, Steele says.

Over the next 34 hours, more than 100 firefighters—South Lynches crews, plus others from neighboring departments and across the state—battled the huge blaze even as outside temperatures soared to 103 F. Steele rotated his volunteers in and out of the warehouse frequently, giving them time to cool down and grab fresh air tanks.

By Saturday evening, the exhausted volunteers had quenched the fire and minimized property damage, with no injuries other than a few cases of heat exhaustion.

Steele can recite multiple stories of how South Lynches volunteers have saved lives and property because they were trained and ready to respond to emergencies at a moment’s notice. But not all calls have happy endings.

Firefighter Tim Watson, a volunteer with Edgefield Fire Department, doesn’t like to talk about it, but he has vivid memories of responding at the scene of a head-on collision between a semi-trailer truck and a family car carrying a father and his two children. The kids survived; the father did not.

“It was a gruesome thing to have to deal with,” says Watson, a first-class lineman with Aiken Electric Cooperative. “You bring it home with you, but you don’t dwell on it. That separates the people who can do the job from those who can’t handle it.”

A routine call to a fire or accident often turns out to be the moment you made a critical difference in someone’s life, says Greg Tisdale, a volunteer for both Williamsburg County Fire Department and Kingstree Fire Department.

“When somebody’s life is falling apart, you’re there to save what you can,” says Tisdale, project manager for safety and training at Santee Electric Cooperative. “You’re there when they need you the most.”

Being willing and able to help their neighbors is why volunteers like Watson and Tisdale—along with many other co-op employees and members statewide—join volunteer fire departments.

“It’s something you don’t do on a whim,” Watson says. “You have to have a calling to want to help the community.”

The job demands a hefty time commitment. That’s the biggest challenge in recruiting and keeping volunteers, who make up nearly two-thirds of South Carolina’s firefighting forces. Over the past 30 years, the number of volunteers across the U.S. has dropped 13 percent, creating a shortage in South Carolina and other states, according to Bryan Riebe, recruitment and retention coordinator for the S.C. State Firefighters Association.
Forward-looking departments, like South Lynches, are recruiting young volunteers still in high school, beginning their extensive training before jobs and families start competing for their time, Riebe says.

“We try to get recruits in as junior members,” says James Epps, captain and personnel coordinator for South Lynches, which serves parts of Florence and Williamsburg counties. “By the time they turn 18, they’ve already completed their training, and they can start fighting fires.”

Volunteers complete all the same training that paid firefighters do, Epps says. Fires pose the same dangers whether you’re paid to fight them or not. And many calls also demand skills for handling vehicle accidents, medical emergencies and hazardous waste incidents.

The basic course is 113 hours and covers firefighting essentials, including rescues, ladder and rope skills, water supply, ventilation, and live-fire training. Paid firefighters can knock that out in four weeks of full-day training, but it takes about three months for volunteers in part-time classes, Epps says.

Add in mandatory training on hazardous materials, plus learning first aid and CPR, which South Lynches requires, and more coursework to achieve Firefighter 1 or 2 status—all told, it’s nearly 200 hours. Once certified, all firefighters attend regular drills to keep skills fresh.

“It’s a real challenge. There’s what life requires of you, then you throw in what we require—it’s tough,” Epps says.

There’s more training if you want to be allowed to drive the fire truck. (Doesn’t everybody want to drive the truck?)

“Yeah,” Epps admits with a grin, “some people just want to drive the truck!”) Drivers pick up an added responsibility, he says: “Somebody has to come and get the truck when the call comes in at 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning.”

Then there’s the challenge of learning how to suit up in 60 pounds of bunker gear in less than two minutes, from the feet up—boots, pants, suspenders, jacket, flash hood (covers the head and tucks into the coat collar), air pack with body straps, face mask, helmet and gloves.

To give me a feel for it all, Steele let me suit up in his bunker gear and walk through a smoke-filled live-burn drill. It took five helpful firefighters about seven minutes to get me fitted and tucked safely into all the gear (see page 20). And, yes, it’s very heavy—even heavier when it gets wet.

‘It’s something you don’t do on a whim. You have to have a calling to want to help the community.’

—TIM WATSON, EDGEFIELD FIRE DEPARTMENT VOLUNTEER AND Aiken Electric Cooperative FIRST-CLASS LINEMAN

TEAM LEADERS Officers who lead the South Lynches Fire Department in emergency response operations and regular drills include (left to right) Capt. James Epps, a paid staff member in charge of personnel and training; and longtime volunteers David Malone, assistant chief, and Robbie Steele, chief. The SLFD crew of about 130 volunteer firefighters at nine stations serves south-central Florence County and northwestern Williamsburg County.

ON THE SCENE On a rainy night last January, SLFD volunteers responded to a mobile home fire on First Oxtown Road, just northeast of Lake City. SLFD volunteer Mike Eaddy photographed his fellow firefighters battling the blaze around 10 p.m.
‘WHAT IF NOBODY ANSWERS IT?’

Balancing department duties with jobs and families is an ongoing challenge for volunteers.

Calls for help are almost always “not good timing—usually you’re not just sitting around,” says Josh Strickland, a married father of two young children who volunteers with Grove Fire Department in Anderson County. On a recent evening, after being up late with his kids, he got called out to a house fire at 1:30 a.m., came home exhausted three hours later, and had to get ready for work as a Little River Electric Cooperative lineman at 5 a.m.

But when that tell-tale tone sounds on the pager, volunteers feel a deep sense of obligation to respond.

“If you’re a paid firefighter, you work your shift, and you go home, but if you’re a volunteer, whenever that tone goes off, you go,” Watson says. “What if nobody answers it?” Employers vary in the freedom they give volunteers to leave work to respond to emergency calls, Epps says. Smaller, family-owned businesses may be more willing to let an employee leave to fight a fire. Corporate bosses may be less flexible.

Calls for help are almost always ‘not good timing—usually you’re not just sitting around.’
—JOSH STRICKLAND, GROVE FIRE DEPARTMENT VOLUNTEER AND LITTLE RIVER ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LINEMAN

Across the state, electric cooperative employees and others affiliated with the co-ops serve as emergency responders. Here are some of the people who live the cooperative principle of “concern for community” as volunteers:

**JASON FLOYD**
Lineman, Santee Electric Cooperative; Station 13 lieutenant, Clarendon County Fire Department

Watching firefighters rescue his parents’ burning house when he was just 15 inspired Floyd’s wish to be just like them. “When I saw it, I said, ‘I’ve got to do this,’” he says. “It’s not really about being a hero; I just want to be a help to people.”

**JEREMY COURTNEY**
Lineman, Aiken Electric Cooperative; firefighter, Johnston Fire Department

Courtney decided to volunteer after the Johnston Fire Department came to the rescue of his brother, who was injured in a bad vehicle accident during an evening thunderstorm. Courtney was out working a power outage for the co-op when the accident happened.

**LINDSI SCHOFIELD**
Daughter of Aiken Electric Cooperative member services representative Lisa Lucas; former firefighter with Couchton Fire Rescue, Aiken; now a professional EMT in Murrells Inlet

Couchton’s 2013 Volunteer of the Year, Schofield remembers, “We kind of lived at the department” during South Carolina’s big ice storm in 2014. She and a paramedic drove Schofield’s four-wheel-drive truck down a remote dirt road to rescue a pregnant woman in premature labor during the storm, because the ambulance couldn’t handle the rough, icy terrain.

**BENJI BROWN**
Warehouse/staker, Aiken Electric Cooperative; firefighter, Center Fire Department, Aiken

Brown describes his fellow firefighters as “a brotherhood” that works and trains together. “You learn to trust the people you work with.”

**BILLY HOUSE**
Construction planner, Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative; firefighter, Holly Springs Volunteer Fire Department, Inman

“I’m always making sure the guys are doing stuff safely on the scene. I want to make sure at the end of the day they go home to their families and enjoy life.”

**CHRIS FRYE**
Line crew supervisor, Santee Electric Cooperative; firefighter, Clarendon County Fire Department

Frye knows he faces dangers routinely in his roles as both a lineman and a firefighter. But he enjoys the camaraderie of both jobs and "trying to help save people’s property, and their memories.”

**TRINA ADAMS**
Field representative, Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative; volunteer, Oconee County Special Rescue and Oconee County Dive Team

Adams volunteers alongside her husband, Steven, who serves as chief of Fair Play Fire Department. “It’s a calling,” she says. “You have to care. It has to be a passion.”

**STACEY TISDALE**
Line crew supervisor, Santee Electric Cooperative; captain, Williamsburg County Fire Department and Kingstree Fire Department

As a co-op lineman, Tisdale was often called out to structure fires in his Kingstree community, cutting power to a house or business to keep the scene safe for emergency responders and bystanders. The department's firefighters encouraged him to join up, since he was usually on hand anyway. Now, when he's on call at a fire for the co-op, he'll suit up to help fight the fire after he's completed his co-op duties.
Chris Cady, manager of supply chain and facilities for Aiken Electric Cooperative, knows linemen aren’t always able to leave a job site to respond to emergencies. In his office role, Cady, who volunteers as a firefighter with Couchton Fire Rescue and chairs its board of trustees, has a little more freedom.

“You find a lot of firemen at co-ops, even on the line crew where it’s not as easy to get away. Sometimes it’s easier [for me] to say, ‘Hey, nothing’s happening right this minute, I can run down to this medical call and be back in an hour or two,’” Cady says. “Not many companies would let their employees do that.”

Aiken Electric, located in Couchton’s service district, has a “symbiotic relationship” with the department, Cady says, supporting volunteers’ service and providing extra equipment to the fire department when needed.

“There’s a real connection between the co-op and the fire department,” Cady says. “The co-op has that commitment to community, and the service I give to the fire department is part of serving the community.”

**BACKBONE OF THE NATION**

Unlike so many S.C. fire departments that are struggling to keep enough volunteers trained and ready to help in an emergency, South Lynches is “comfortable” right now, Steele says, with 130 firefighters on its roster, answering 800 to 1,000 calls a year.

But recruiting goes on constantly, because the numbers

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**COMMUNITY**

**OLIVER DOWDLE**, safety and job training coordinator, York Electric Cooperative; chief, Sharon Fire and Rescue

A 31-year volunteer, Dowdle has watched Sharon’s roster dwindle through the years, with fewer recruits to replace those who age out. Still, somebody has to answer the calls, he says. “People expect somebody to be there when they need help, but they don’t want to be the ones to have to do it.”

**BRET TIMMERMAN**, lineman, Little River Electric Cooperative; firefighter, Cold Spring Fire and Rescue, Abbeville

There was fleeting moment, once, as Timmerman rushed into a huge fire at an Abbeville mill, that he asked himself: Why am I doing this? “You need to have your heart in it to do the job,” he says. “Don’t do it for the glory. Do it because you want to help people. Not because you want to get in the big truck with the big lights and the sirens on.”

**ARTHUR BAYS**, chairman, Lynches River Electric Cooperative Operation Round Up board; volunteer, Teal’s Mill Volunteer Fire Department, Chesterfield

Now 70, Bays still carries the memory of an infant who died, many years ago, in a mobile home fire that was started accidentally by a toddler playing with a lighter. Though volunteers were on the scene quickly, “there was nothing we could do to get her to in time,” he recalls. “I think about that all the time. It still hurts my heart.”

**ROGER SMITH**, Lynches River Electric Cooperative Operation Round Up board; safety officer, Sandhill Volunteer Fire Department, Jefferson

As both a grandfather and the safety officer at his department, Smith (pictured at a recent 9/11 memorial in Pageland) is mindful of the importance of teaching children about fire safety. It’s gratifying, he says, to be at the scene of a fire and know that the kids got out of the house safely because they learned their lessons about listening for smoke alarms and knowing escape routes. “Material things can be replaced,” Smith says. “People can’t.”

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**If you want to volunteer**

No matter what first attracts someone to volunteering as a firefighter, eventually the service is its own reward, South Lynches Fire Department Capt. James Epps says. “People may walk in the door for excitement. But two or three years down the road, they don’t care as much about that,” Epps says. “It’s more about helping people.”

Volunteers can serve as firefighters, EMTs, administrative helpers, chaplains, or other auxiliary supporters. Training requirements vary according to the position. Teens can start training as young as 15 through junior programs, but they cannot participate in active firefighting until they turn 18.

Requirements for serving as a volunteer firefighter vary by local fire department, but generally volunteers must:

- be at least 18 years of age;
- have a high school diploma or GED;
- pass a SLED background check; and
- be approved as medically fit for duty.

To volunteer, visit scvolunteerfire.org or call the National Volunteer Fire Council recruitment line at (800) 347-3546.
**SUITING UP**

**BY DIANE VETO PARHAM**

**THE BURN BUILDING SOUTH LYNCHES**

Fire Department in Lake City uses for training is impressive—four stories high on one end, so firefighters can practice rappelling down the exterior; an interior maze of rooms of varying shapes and heights; lots of stairs; computerized sensors to monitor temperatures. And, wow, does it smell smoky in there.

I toured it in street clothes, with doors and windows open to let sunlight in, and no fire burning inside. Then SLFD Chief Robbie Steele offered to let me walk through a live-burn drill—an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.

First, I had to suit up. Firefighters do this very quickly. I may have set a new record for slow. Bunker gear goes on from the feet up. Boots start out tucked inside the pants legs, so you can climb into both in one motion. (Except it takes me three tries to get it right.) The hefty boots make my feet feel leaden.

Next, hike up the pants, pull suspenders over the shoulders, and tighten the straps. If this were my own personal gear, I’d already have the straps sized to fit my body, saving precious seconds. But I’m borrowing the chief’s gear, so a team of helpful firefighters encircles me, tightening, tugging and straightening from every angle.

On goes the weighty overcoat, zipped and Velcroed shut. A knit flash hood wraps over my head to protect my neck, ears and face. I feel like a 4-year-old being bundled to go play in the snow. There’s a satisfying sense of protection inside these layers. On the other hand, this is August, and it’s pretty toasty inside this outfit. And I’m nowhere near the fire yet.

Somebody hooks a 40-pound air pack on my back. Straps wrap over my shoulders and around my torso. “Do a little hop,” my coaches tell me, to shift the pack up higher on my back, so it doesn’t drag me down backwards. The air mask clamps over my face—a little claustrophobic. Suddenly, my air pack starts beeping. If a firefighter is motionless for 30 seconds, the air pack emits high-pitched beeps to alert his partners that he may be in trouble. Jiggle the air regulator every few seconds if you’re standing still, they tell me.

My dressers help me pull my gloves on—how does anybody do this in two minutes? Somebody tops me off with a helmet—the chief’s helmet, no less. Somebody tops me off with a helmet—the chief’s helmet, no less.

“Get ready to go,” Steele signals me. Walk in all this stuff? I feel slow and awkward. If I had to, I could make a clunky escape. Meanwhile, firefighters haul hoses, wield axes, lift victims, climb ladders and crawl through tight spaces dressed like this.

As I lumber toward the burn building, assistant chief David Malone high fives me—just like a hero. Suddenly, I catch the thrill of the moment, the sense of adventure. Firefighters love the battle. Steele tells me, “You’ll see them come out of a fire, soaking wet, whip their masks off. They’ll high five each other and talk about, boy, that was hot, and what happened in there.” He says, “They like the challenge.”

Stepping into the dark building, I check to make sure my firefighter chaperones surround me. I juggle that air regulator like crazy, although the beeps are kind of comforting. A wave of heat assaults me the moment I enter. This is just a small, controlled fire; what must a real structure fire feel like? Smoke blocks my vision as we inch toward the fire—burning bales of straw, which are safely confined inside a cage. With each step, the heat grows more intense.

Could I do this for real? Hours of training, the spur-of-the-moment response to emergency, the courage? I don’t know if it’s in me. I am keenly aware of all the safety measures allowing me to be here—and how, in a real fire, firefighters have so little control over their environment, relying entirely on each other and their training to come out safely.

As we exit, a firefighter who was overcome by heat is being tended by EMTs. Even in a drill, the dangers are real.

They say you understand a man only after you’ve walked in his shoes. Wearing a firefighter’s boots and walking into a burning building gave me just a glimpse inside the world of emergency responders and a new appreciation for the courage and commitment of our state’s volunteer firefighters.

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“We want to be part of your department, because you didn’t give up; nobody went home until you found him,” Steele recalls.

Watson says that kind of dedication is what makes volunteer firefighters “the backbone of the nation.” There’s no glory or glamour, he says, “not like what you see on TV.”

“There’s no reward. You’re not getting anything for it,” Watson says. “Except you hope that somebody would do it for you.”

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**CAMARADERIE**

David Malone, SLFD’s assistant chief, high fives Parham as a vote of confidence as she makes her way toward the burn building. Jordan Morris (right), a lieutenant at SLFD’s Cades station, is among the volunteers offering guidance and support.

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### Spotlight competition?

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| Names of others (freelancers or organizations) involved in the project, if applicable | Freelance photographer Mic Smith provided images |

| Describe your/the co-op's role in the project | South Carolina Living wanted to explore the connection between co-ops and the volunteer firefighters who are the backbone of the emergency response system statewide. This story was assigned to Assistant Editor Diane Veto Parham who worked with all ECSC cooperatives to identify and interview employees and members who serve in VFDs. She even donned firefighter gear and participated in a live-burn training drill with a volunteer department. |

| Describe others' role in the project (Reference outside sources of material, including templates; pre-existing Web tools and apps; information from outside groups, such as Straight Talk or Touchstone Energy; stock photos and music, etc.) | Local-page editors at all ECSC cooperatives were instrumental in providing names and contact information of employees, trustees and members who were willing to be interviewed. Employees of Santee Electric Cooperative and the officers of South Lynches Fire Department graciously allowed Parham and photographer Mic Smith access to their live-burn training facility. |

| Circulation or Number of People Reached | 485000 |

| Number of Attendees | |

| Project's Budget | $1,250 for photography |

| Target Audience(s) | All S.C. co-op members, general public |

| Project's Objective | South Carolina Living wanted to explore the connection between co-ops and the volunteer firefighters who are the backbone of the emergency response system statewide. Our secondary goal was to honor the brave men and women who risk their lives to save others. A third goal was to help volunteer units recruit new members. |

| Restrictions/Limitations | From the start, we were committed to listing all S.C. co-op employees who serve and consented to having their name published. It made a for a tight layout, but we made it work. |

| Describe why you chose this type of social media and how you used it | |

| Provide a brief summary that states the purpose of the event, how the program was implemented, and results and how they were measured | |

| Provide a brief summary that states the purpose, how the program was implemented, and results and how they were measured using the RACE framework. Each component has its own word limit noted below. | |