



## Copper Mountain College teacher gets class ready to fight fires

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By Rebecca Unger, Hi-Desert Star



**Photo by Rebecca Unger**

Fire technology instructor James Brakebill arranged for this 1987 fire engine to be donated for class use at Copper Mountain College. From left are students Carl Neal, Adam Weis, Lyndsey Shupp, Colin Sauter, Christina Profita and Joshua Evers, instructor Brakebill and students Johnathan Cambon, John Mackert, Steven Savacool and John Waller.

JOSHUA TREE — “You cannot panic as a firefighter,” master fire instructor James Brakebill told his students during a Friday afternoon fire technology class at Copper Mountain College last month. “People’s lives depend on you knowing this material.”

Brakebill had just taken his pupils through an algebra lesson to determine the appropriate pressure for the fire pump at the scene of a blaze. These calculations are vital, because mismatched pressures and water flow equal chaos and disaster while a family huddles at the curb watching its home burn.

The 15 future firefighters in the class that afternoon answered a variety of questions thrown at them by Brakebill, questions about math, apparatus, hydraulics and physics. They proved they had been studying.

The students are part of a growing program at Copper Mountain College. Fire technology is now a full-time course, and Brakebill is teaching the prerequisites for his students to transfer into fire academies anywhere in the country.

“Copper Mountain College is now the model for other community colleges, and other states are trying to get their colleges to adopt the model curriculum,” Brakebill said.

He’s also created the Fire Technology Club for his students, who, along with helping out at local fire stations, are providing fire-prevention services for the college.

One of his students, John Mackert of Yucca Valley, self-admitted “adrenaline junkie,” said the college counselor’s office suggested firefighting as a career path.

“I came to the class and fell in love with the program,” Mackert said. “It’s really good for the college to get this kind of program, and the way Jim teaches this is really awesome.”

Christina Profita of Yucca Valley came to the class with experience fighting fires. For her, it represents a second chance.

"I got into trouble and went to prison," Profita said. "My whole 'I'm doomed for life' thing ended when I went to inmate fire camp at Warner Springs in San Diego County. I decided there's something better to life, and it's something I can do because I can get hired with the feds even though I have three felonies."

Two of their classmates are veterans of the U.S. Marine Corps. Carl Neal of Yucca Valley retired from the Marines after 26 years. He now teaches electronics at the Twentynine Palms Marine base and has been using the Montgomery G.I. Bill to go to school. The CMC fire tech class inspired him to be a volunteer firefighter.

Michael Reinier of Twentynine Palms is a 10-year Marine veteran. "You spend a lot of time in other countries doing things for other people, so you want to start doing things to help where you live," Reinier said.

For students who want to become paid firefighters, Brakebill is setting up the next step in their education: He's working with Chief Jim Thompson to set up a one-year volunteer internship program at the Twentynine Palms Fire Department for students who successfully complete CMC's fire academy.

"After completing all the course requirements and the internship, they'll be eligible to apply for a firefighting job anywhere in California," Brakebill said.

He hopes they'll stay here and work for one of Morongo Basin's fire stations.

"I'm very passionate about this program, this school, this community and about young people training here, staying here and reinvesting back," Brakebill said. "And one way to keep pride in a community is for people to have their own fire department in their community."

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