



Nikki Smith

'90 B.A. communications
Firefighter
Kent, Washington

She didn't grow up wanting to be a firefighter. Far from it. As a matter of fact, Nikki Smith was kind of skinny and thought a career in communications would be just the right direction for her future. In a way, it was, in that it led her to her true passion.

After graduating from Eastern with a degree in communications, Nikki's first job was as an admissions counselor at a college in West Virginia.

"My dad was career Army and retired in Medical Lake," she said. "I lived a bunch of places, but I really love Washington and have a deep feeling for the outdoors. I'm especially drawn to Mount Rainier."

So, she came home after two years and worked at a bank, as a dispatcher for the Washington State Patrol in Everett

and as a public educator with the SeaTac Fire Department.

"I loved teaching fire and life safety to the public," Nikki said. "I loved the fire department, I loved teaching, but after seven years, I realized I didn't just want to teach about it – I wanted to *do* it."

So, she set about getting in better shape, worked with a personal trainer in order to put on 25 pounds and learned a lot of technical and mechanical skills before passing the firefighter's exam.

"You need the bulk and to be strong because there's a lot to carry, you get dirty and you just can't be a wimp," she said.

She was hired by the Kent Fire Department for "the best job in the world. It's not always the nicest or the most fun, but you can change lives for the better.

"When no one knows who else to call when they're in trouble, they call the fire department, and someone comes to help. I like being that someone. Do you know how incredible it is to be able to help people, to be able to do something for someone else like that?"

Nearly 70 percent of fire department calls are aid related, she said: "There is everything from clearing roads of downed trees after a windstorm to triaging victims at a vehicle crash scene, quelling house fires to resuscitating a child pulled from a pool. No two days are alike."

As a student, Nikki worked in the President's Office. Dr. Alex Schilt was president then, and she recalled how kindly he treated people, how he spoke with strangers as if they were friends, how he knew the names of everyone he had ever met.

"That's something that helped shape me as a person," Nikki said. "That was a model for me in how you treat people. I try to do that now, no matter what the situation in my work."

Nikki is married to Tony Smith, an electrician who is also an Army reservist. They live in Sumner, Wash., where Nikki can see Mount Rainier outside her window every day.

