

College to offer firefighter scholarship

One dependent of a volunteer firefighter picked each year

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Firefighters from across the county gathered at the Buckhannon Fire Department Wednesday night to celebrate a new West Virginia Wesleyan College scholarship. Pictured standing from left are Banks District Vol. Fire Chief Gary Bonnett, Upshur County Commissioner Creed Pletcher, Mayor Kenny Davidson, Warren District Vol. Fire Department Chief Joe Carrico, West Virginia Wesleyan College Director of Admissions John Waltz, Selbyville Vol. Fire Department firefighter Art Wilson, Buckhannon Fire Chief Mitch Tacy, Washington District Fire Company Chief Jeff Wamsley and David Taylor, director of extended learning at Wesleyan. Kneeling are John Wilt, assistant fire chief at Ellamore and Buckhannon Fire Department Lieutenant JB Kimble.

Who says it doesn't pay to volunteer?

West Virginia Wesleyan College announced a pioneering program Wednesday night at the Buckhannon Fire Department that will reward one dependent of a volunteer firefighter or EMS professional with a nearly \$65,000 scholarship in recognition of their parents' or grandparents' commitment to public service.

Wesleyan director of admissions John Waltz made an appearance at the seventh session of the Upshur County Citizens Firefighter Academy to announce a groundbreaking scholarship opportunity that will grant one qualifying dependent a child or grandchild of a volunteer a half-direct costs Wesleyan scholarship, which will pay for the recipient's tuition, room, board and fees for four years. Waltz priced the college's contribution at approximately \$16,172 a year for the selected student, who would be permitted to tack on other financial awards, such as the PROMISE Scholarship, to pay down the difference.

"We really appreciate their service, so we wanted to find some way to give back to our volunteer firefighters and our EMS personnel," Waltz told the sea of fully decked-out fire department chiefs and government officials, including Mayor Kenny Davidson and Upshur County Commissioner Creed Pletcher, who turned out to tune in to the announcement.

The yet-to-be-named scholarship is the first of its kind in the state, according to David Taylor, coordinator of the academy, director of extended learning at Wesleyan and impetus behind the idea. Although other fire associations throughout the state have offered smaller scholarships in varying amounts to dependents of volunteer first responders, no other academic award can compete with the scope and magnitude of the new scholarship, he said.

Taylor was inspired to push for the program after listening to Warren District Vol. Fire Department chief Joe Carrico speak at last semester's Buckhannon-Upshur Citizen's Leadership Institute of Governmental Affairs.

"What he said was so moving and so compelling to me," Taylor said. Carrico had been detailing just how many hours of training volunteer firefighters are required to complete when a class member asked him how the families of volunteer firefighters handle their absence, Taylor recounted.

"Joe just said, 'They're supportive. They understand,'" Taylor recalled. "So I thought, 'Let's give back to the people in the community who do all these things free gratis for us. What's the most important thing in the world to your dependent? Education is absolutely the most important thing in the world to your child.'"

Taylor, who fought fires for the Warren District Vol. Fire Department for three years in the 1970s, said he hasn't forgotten those formative experiences.

"I haven't forgotten where I came from," he said. "I have a great appreciation for what these guys do having been in the public service arena for years. We're setting a very high bar for others to follow."

Though the scholarship due date will probably differ in the future, application packets will be available by May 31, a fast-forwarding effort that will enable qualified applicants to vie for the money and begin their educations when the 2011 fall semester commences.

Waltz described the scholarship as a "pilot" program that could spill into other counties in coming years and open up to residents living there. To qualify currently, applicants must apply and be admitted through the college's admission process, be a dependent of an Upshur County volunteer firefighter or EMS professional in good standing with a chartered department, enroll as a full-time residential student at Wesleyan and remain in good academic standing with the college throughout her or his career. Applicants must also satisfy at least two of three benchmarks to be considered: a 3.75 grade point average; a combined SAT score of 1800 or 26 composite ACT score; or a ranking in the top 10 percent of her or his graduating class.

Carrico welcomed the thank-you Wesleyan's delivering through the initiative. "It's a nice gesture on Wesleyan's part to say thank you to the volunteers," he said. "It's especially nice when you don't hear that a lot. It also may help us in recruiting other volunteers who might want to take advantage of this opportunity."

He only wishes it had happened sooner.

"It would have been a nice thing to have years ago when I was getting ready to send my kids to school," Carrico said.