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MEDIA RELEASE

MALMSBURY CAPTAIN WINS AWARD FOR FOCUS ON INCLUSION

Malmsbury Fire Brigade has been changing to better reflect the local community, leading to awards and stronger local connections.

Captain Tony Stephens has won a Spirit of CFA Excellence in Inclusion and Fairness Award for his role in promoting the fresh look.

“It’s not just me; the whole brigade has had a focus on improving inclusion and diversity,” Tony said.

“To serve the community we live in; the diversity of our brigade needs to reflect the diversity of the community.”

Like many rural fire brigades, Malmsbury has been traditionally dominated by middle aged white males.

“By getting more diversity we increase numbers which give us more options during Monday to Friday business hours, and we get new skills and diversity in thinking,” Tony said.

“It makes the brigade stronger and we get more support from the community because they see that we reflect their diversity and we can meet their needs.”

To add more diversity to its ranks, the brigade has been engaging with young people and community groups, improving its social media presence and promoting the message that there is a role for everyone in the CFA.

“It’s not just for those wanting to hop on the truck and fight fires; it’s about community education and other support functions behind the scenes,” Tony said.

The brigade has a diversity and inclusion plan with milestones to achieve, but Tony admits there’s no end game. “We’re 80 per cent where we want to be but we’re always looking for ways to improve; always setting new targets,” he said.

About 40 per cent of the 35-member brigade are female, and most are operational fire fighters. The brigade has five members aged under 24, retirees, Indigenous people and people from the LGBTI community.

So far this financial year the brigade has responded to 130 incidents, following 163 last year.

After 12 years in the CFA, Tony enjoys meeting great people and doing good things for the community, and the community's feeling is mutual.

"Last week someone dropped in a cake for morning tea; things like that show we have the community's support," he said.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria CEO Andrew Ford said the days when firefighting was a role for just men have gone.

"Today we have highly experienced and qualified people from all ages, gender, backgrounds and demographics performing front line firefighting roles, operational leadership roles and support roles.

"When we are saving your property or helping in your time of need, you don't care whether we're male or female, paid or volunteer, or what our race, religion or sexuality we might be; you just appreciate volunteers are there with their local knowledge, experience, training and professionalism."