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MEDIA RELEASE

FIRST FEMALE CAPTAIN WANTS MORE WOMEN VOLUNTEERS

Fiona Quinlan might be the first volunteer female captain of the Woodside CFA volunteer brigade, but she hopes she's not the last.

Now 64, Ms Quinlan fulfilled a life-long ambition of becoming a CFA volunteer firefighter five years ago and has quickly risen through the ranks.

"I always wanted to join but because I lived in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne I never had the chance," she said.

Woodside, at the start of the 90 Mile Beach, was a holiday home until Ms Quinlan moved there full-time about 10 years ago to teach at Yarram Secondary College.

After settling, her attention soon focused on volunteering with the CFA.

"I decided that if I'm living in the middle of all these trees I need to learn about fires and how to protect myself and my home," she said.

She undertook minimum skills training and with her heavy rigid licence was soon driving the fire tanker while being mentored by the experienced volunteers in the brigade.

As the newly elected captain, Ms Quinlan hopes to reinvigorate the brigade and attract more younger and female volunteers.

"There aren't many females in the brigade but there should be a lot more involved," she said. "I'll be encouraging more women to join, including girls at school. It's not just men going off to fight the fires and the women staying at home; women should get the same skills."

Ms Quinlan aims to start a junior brigade. "The average age of volunteers is in the late 50s, if we can get some juniors involved we might also get their parents," she said.

"I hope my teaching skills come to the fore."

Ms Quinlan places a high priority on volunteerism, although she admits most CFA volunteers are disgruntled about the ongoing CFA dispute. “If all the volunteers stopped, society would fall apart,” she said. “Nothing can replace volunteers.”

Woodside is a 100 per cent volunteer brigade with 41 on the books. They usually attend about 10 incidents each year, including structure, caravan, forest and grass fires, and add to the CFA volunteer surge capacity by helping at other incidents across the region.

They also patrol local free camping sites. “We’ve had a few dangerous incidents because people don’t properly extinguish camp fires,” Ms Quinlan said.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria State Councillor Bryan Walpole said Ms Quinlan’s appointment was a fantastic example that should inspire more women to volunteer and take on senior roles.

“There is huge experience and skills amongst our CFA women volunteers and we need to do everything we can to recognise and encourage these women into leadership roles,” Mr Walpole said.

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