



## The Oregonian

- **Part 1:** Wildfire contracting costs too high, critics say
- **Part 2:** University ceremony honors fire dead

### University ceremony honors fire dead

**Copter crash - About 100 gather to remember the four firefighters with ties to the SOU campus**

Tuesday, August 12, 2008

**WADE NKRUMAH and KIMBERLY A.C. WILSON**

**The Oregonian Staff**

ASHLAND -- The Southern Oregon University community gathered privately Monday afternoon to remember four of the firefighters who died last week in a helicopter crash in Northern California.

All had strong connections to the university.

Flags were flown at half-staff on the 5,000-student campus, and the gathering attracted a standing-room-only group of about 100 people to the Commuter Resource Center at Stephenson Student Union. The crowd included much of the Raiders' football team.

They were joined by University President Mary Cullinan, other administrators, faculty and staff.

The fact that so many of the firefighters had ties to the school did not come as a surprise here.

More so than most campuses, in Oregon or elsewhere, Southern Oregon has a large number of students who work dangerous summer jobs -- fighting wildfires, for example, or working as deckhands on crabbing or fishing boats in Alaska. Proximity to the jobs and the high potential pay are too much to resist for many students.

"It's not book money," said associate professor Dennis Dunleavy said. "They're supporting themselves during the school year on summer salaries."

#### Community bonds

Reporters were not allowed into Monday's event, but Cullinan said others in attendance included Susanne Steele, mother of David Steele, one of the fallen firefighters; firefighters who had fought alongside the men being honored; and officials from Grayback Forestry, the company that employed the firefighters who died.

"People shared personal memories; talked about the kind of contribution these young men had made to our university community," Cullinan said after the 45-minute gathering. "I think we all had a very powerful sense of what a close-knit community this university is.

"We're all feeling this loss very intensely."

The dead firefighters with Southern Oregon University ties:

Edrik Gomez, 19, an incoming junior double majoring in political science and communications.

Scott Charlson, 25, who would have returned for a final year in the journalism program.

Steven "Caleb" Renno, 21, who attended Southern Oregon from fall 2005 through winter 2007.

Ashland-raised David Steele, 19. He attended Central Oregon Community College in Bend, but his sister is scheduled to start at Southern Oregon this fall term, and his mother works on campus and is a returning grad student.

In addition, Ricci Coultas, daughter of co-pilot William Coultas, is a junior communications major. Coultas, 44, survived the crash but was seriously burned and is hospitalized in Sacramento.

### **"Felt all around"**

Dunleavy taught Gomez and Charlson, as well as Steele's mother, in the communications department. The impact of the disaster, he said, "is felt all around us."

Those with the Southern Oregon University connections died when a Sikorsky S-61 crashed about 7:45 p.m. Tuesday while the crew was helping battle the Buckhorn fire, one arm of the 94,000-acre Iron Complex of fires on the Shasta-Trinity National Forest northwest of Redding.

Christine Florence, the university's executive director of marketing, said the midafternoon gathering was closed to media so those attending could feel more comfortable sharing feelings.

The event was one of two held Monday that honored Charlson. At the First Baptist Church on the outskirts of Eugene, family members, friends and fellow firefighters paid their respects to Charlson, who fought fires to earn college money in hopes of becoming a sports journalist.

Nearly 300 people gathered at the church.

Wade Nkrumah 503-294-7627; wadenkrumah@ news.oregonian.com The Associated Press contributed to this report.

©2008 Oregonian