

Profits from Book about Wildland Firefighters Go to Their Fund

■ Those Who Don the Yellow Nomex and Face Walls of Flame Are Portrayed in a Human Light

While it is often true that you can't tell a book by its cover, the cover is the way a book reaches out to a potential reader. The cover of "One Foot in the Black" radiates the fury of an out-of-control wildfire so intensely that one can feel the heat.

While the Malibu City Council debates the merits of adding a volunteer fire contingent, one resident can't say enough about the professionals who crew local fire lines. He has written a book about them and is "donating all [of his] profits to the Wildland Firefighter Foundation based in Boise, Idaho."

The WFF helps families of firefighters killed in action, the author, three-year local Kurt Kamm explains. "Firefighters are true heroes. These people are the most positive-thinking, selfless individuals I have ever met. Their first thought is not themselves, but 'how can I help you?'"

Specifically, the book is an homage to recruits who go through the training regimen at Malibu's Fire Suppression Camp 8. These paid fire crews do the groundwork—often the most dirty and dangerous work of firefighting—that doesn't always get the attention it deserves in an era of Nighthawk choppers and SuperScoopers.

For someone who writes convincingly about wildland firefighting techniques, Kamm says last October's Canyon Fire was the "first time I lived through a fire." In some ways, he says the book may have helped save his home because he practiced what firefighters taught him about brush clearance and proactive landscaping.

Kamm says he and his wife were awakened when the power went out and they smelled smoke. The call to evacuate came at 4:20 a.m. They had "15 minutes to leave."

He says his wife left with their three dogs and two birds. He followed, leaving the gates open after setting out extra fire hoses he had purchased. An engine crew from Lynnwood was in front of the house when he left.

As the couple waited down at Pacific Coast Highway, there was a period of 10 minutes when they thought their house

was gone. Kamm said he cried silently for three minutes, asking himself, "What do I do next?"

Then at 8:15 a.m., he went back up to the Knolls area. The front gate had melted, railroad ties at the back of the house were burned, as was the land, but the fire had stopped where they had cleared. \$100,000 in insurance took care of the damage.

The title of Kamm's book, "One Foot in the Black," is a wildland firefighting term. It is a position on the fire line next to an area that has already burned ("the black"). It is a dangerous spot, close to the flames, and a safe haven, access to a safety zone for possible escape.

Kamm also sees the title as "a metaphor for the young protagonist who leaves his abusive father and searches for a safe zone in the camaraderie of his fire crew."

The "protagonist" is Greg Kowalski, a teenager from Saginaw, Michigan, who searches for a sense of family to fill a void attributed to his father, an ill-tempered firefighter, who verbally assaults Greg and his younger sister and physically abuses their mother.

Greg copes with adolescence, no easy time under any circumstances, by dreaming of escape, but as is so often the case, escape takes on the familiar. Upon graduation from high school, a captain at the local fire station offers him the chance to enter a wildland fire training program at the California Department

of Forestry and Fire Protection—escape, in short, to the familiar world of the father he still hopes to impress.

When that doesn't happen, the young man heads west to a strenuous apprenticeship, learning the skills required for wildland firefighting. Greg then drives south to Malibu, where he will undergo the rigorous four-week training camp required to join a fire-suppression unit with the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Here at Malibu's own Camp 8 at the top of Las Flores Canyon, Greg finds the family he never had: fellow trainee Luis Zambrano, who dreams of a better life for his wife and infant; Hector Wells, a rootless Native American with years of service as a firefighter; and Capt. Tom Bratton, the not-quite stereotypical gruff-yet-kind-hearted superior who becomes a surrogate father.

A wildfire raging in the hills north of Los Angeles predictably tests the novice's skills and dedication to the profession.

Although the trials and tribulations of a difficult

childhood and coming to grips with fulfillment despite that background is a universal theme, Kamm's wildland firefighter's personal growth is a heartfelt picture of the extraordinary bonds that can ensue when men and women work in harm's way and have to count on each other in life and death situations.

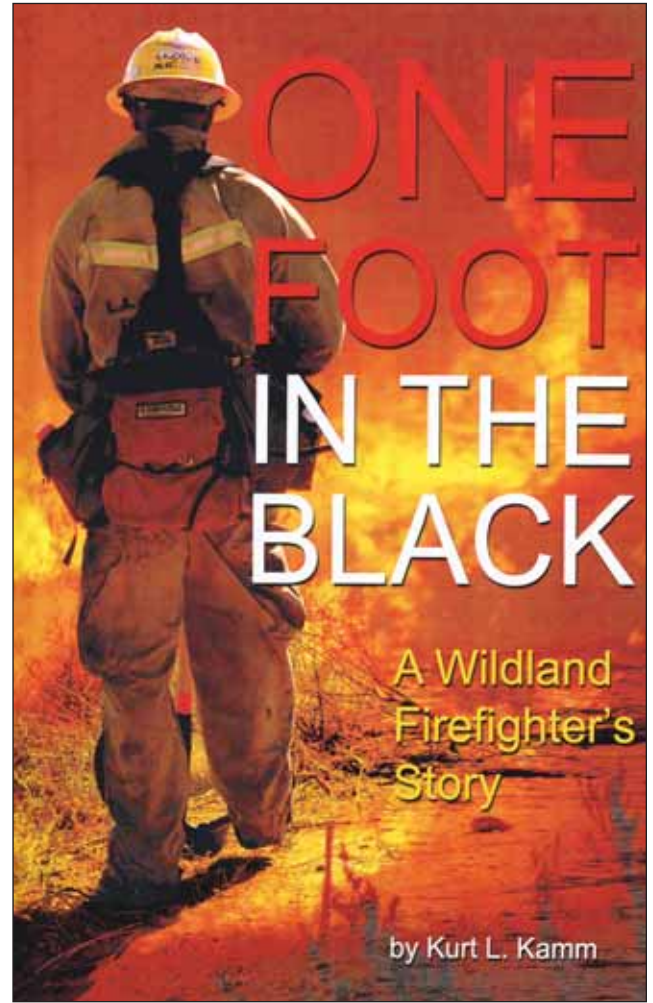
Kamm takes pride in the accuracy of the material on firefighting technique that is interwoven with the personal story line.

Malibuites who already hold firefighters in high regard will come away even more impressed knowing that these "heroes" are dealing with the same serious personal problems as people who do not face this level of danger on a regular basis.

That these individuals are decidedly human does not lessen the nature of their valor. If anything, Kamm may enhance the reader's sense of the heroic by showing how fire crews set aside their personal concerns at the first sign of smoke. He also shows the hazing, family problems, substance abuse and other issues faced by those who work the fire lines.

Firefighters may not be able to "shake off their pasts" any more than individuals in other professions, but when there are flames all around them, firefighters have to keep their heads free of noise.

There may be that degree of safety when they have "one foot in the black," but the unpredictability of an out-of-control



COINCIDENCE—When a photo of a firefighter dealing with a wall of flames was selected for the book's front cover jacket from Los Angeles County Fire Department files, the man's name was not known. Kamm then learned it was not only a firefighter from Malibu's Camp 8 at the top of Las Flores Canyon, Freddy McLemore, but someone Kamm had met while working on the book.

wildfire demands unwavering concentration.

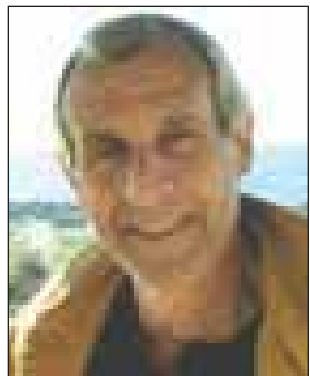
Kamm spent two and a half years writing the book. The Santa Margarita fire occurred halfway through his research and served as the prototype for the wild-fire scenes.

When searching through photos in Los Angeles County Fire Department

files, Kamm selected a photo for the cover of Freddy McLemore from Camp 8, an active crew member at the local facility.

More information about the Wildland Firefighter Foundation is available at <http://wffoundation.org>. The book can be purchased through their webstore.

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