Fire department retirees form business

By Liam Marlaire
Leader-Telegram staff

After decades spent literally putting out fires, three Eau Claire retirees have formed a venture in which they'll be doing that figuratively.

Former Eau Claire fire chiefs Bruce Fuerbringer and Ed Kassing and retired battalion chief Kim Nessel make up the roster for 5 Bugle Training & Consulting. The name derives from the five-bugle cluster that is the rank insignia for a fire chief. Fuerbringer retired as Eau Claire fire chief in March 2007. He joined the department in 1977 and was named its 18th chief in 2001. Kassing succeeded him as chief.

"All of my career actions had the end result of helping others in mind, and that's the goal of this new venture - to bring our education and experience to bear in helping other people, both in personal and professional development efforts and the success of their company overall," Fuerbringer, 57, said.

The company specializes in leadership and organizational training as well as safety and planning consulting services. Fuerbringer, who has a master's degree in risk control from UW-Stout, recently worked with Union Pacific and Canadian National railroads on emergency preparedness in western Wisconsin. He said the demands of their previous jobs made such projects impossible.
"In the fire service, we have to wear a lot of hats," Fuerbringer said. "There's a lot of people out there we can help that we couldn't have when we were working.

"It's a different venue, but on the leadership and safety side there are the same issues."

"It's a very unique blend," Nessel, 53, said of 5 Bugle. "We understand each other's strengths and weaknesses."

Nessel is a certified hazardous materials specialist with more than 25 years of experience in his field. He was a battalion chief responsible for the West Central Wisconsin Regional Haz Mat Response Team. The 9/11 tragedy initially raised safety awareness for businesses and organizations and led to increases in grant money, safety equipment and training opportunities, he said.

"Some still exist, but there have been major cutbacks," Nessel said. "I see a little less preparedness than what I used to see."

Retirements in the public sector also have had an impact.

"Now you have new people who are just getting the basic certifications going," Nessel said.

Kassing has 33 years of experience under his belt and a master's degree in human resource development and training. Both Fuerbringer and Kassing have provided instruction for the National Fire Academy, and all three still teach at Chippewa Valley Technical College. Fuerbringer previously worked for Development Associates USA.

The trio have worked together for decades and have been on both sides of regulatory issues: enforcing compliance and ensuring their own operations are up to code.

"We've got a long history together," Kassing said. "We each have a different expertise, but we complement each other very well."

Training programs on the 5 Bugle website run 90 minutes to three hours and can be customized. Kassing, 55, said the goal is to find gaps in service for business organizations, particularly considering the current budget restraints many are facing.

"Sometimes an outside influence can have a positive effect on a business," he said.
Fuerbringer said leaders too often are chosen for their personality, tenure or technical expertise and may not be prepared for the challenges of having a supervisory role.

"Leaders that struggle oftentimes don't have access to resources that can help them cope with the stress of their position or become better leaders," Fuerbringer said. "Top management sometimes needs a gentle reminder of how a top leader in an organization can impact the company either positively or negatively."

Kassing agreed.

"None of us are perfect leaders, and everyone needs to continue their professional development efforts. It's a lifetime effort, not just a degree or certificate," he said. "We offer real-life experience based on a field that is charged with bringing order to chaos in an effective, efficient manner.

"Planning, besides being a legal requirement in many cases, is also critical to effectively responding to situations we know could happen but hope won't."

Fuerbringer remembers a number of large fires during his career, such as blazes that struck Wagner's bowling alley, the Camaraderie and several furniture stores and lumberyards.

"But what sticks in my mind most are the people that come up to me and thank me for taking care of them on the ambulance, he said. "I once had a gal come up to me and ask me if I was Bruce Fuerbringer. When I said 'yes,' she said, 'You saved my life!'"

"I remember the accident and told her that I was just part of the team that helped her that day. But she remembered my patient care years after the accident, and that stuck with me my entire career."

Motorcycling, camping and reading are among Fuerbringer's interests now that he's "retired." He's also considering a return to triathlons this summer (he insists he's a participant and not a competitor).

They're also eager to bring nearly 100 years of experience in their industry to businesses and organizations around the Chippewa Valley and beyond.

"We have flexible schedules," Fuerbringer said. "And we're careful not to have too many irons in the fire and shortchange anyone, because we still want to have fun in retirement."

For more information about 5 Bugle Training & Consulting, visit 5bugle.net.