

Estero firefighters get buff for calendar

Hunks helping charities

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It's their job to save your life.

But what they're working on now may take your breath away — if bare-chested, brawny firefighters with beckoning smiles are your thing.

Following in Bonita Springs Fire Rescue's smokin' footsteps, the fittest firefighters from Estero Fire Rescue modeled for their first calendar to benefit charities.

"The community was asking for it, saying other places have it. So we asked 'Who wants to be in it?' They raised their hands and they were it," says Susan Lindenmuth, Estero fire spokeswoman.

Now in the hot seat, the work really began for the firefighters. Dieting and heavy-duty exercise was a must.

A towering and tattooed Estero firefighter, Bill Kinkel, 26, can take the heat of being a calendar boy.

He's a former Everblades hockey player accustomed to the sizzle of the spotlight. Kinkel's just never done it bare-chested in front of his normally no-nonsense boss, let alone the public.

"My battalion chief is there holding the reflective light and you're trying to be sexy, and it's awkward because it's your boss," he says, laughing.

Kinkel posed in front of a rescue truck with suspenders, wearing an air pack, with cardiac monitors, his jacket open, shirt off, helmet on, helmet off.

They must have taken 100 photos, he says.

Kinkel likes to think of it as being honored for his skill at his job, in the same way a hockey player

earns hype.

After all, a lot of preparation goes into those sweltering shots.

Some guys lost 30 pounds with chicken-and-broccoli-style healthy meals and hard-working exercise routines. They held each other accountable so they could each reach their fitness goals.

Everyone will see the results: 13 months of maximum manly health.

"It's a reminder to the community you may not need us every day, but when you do need us we're training and healthy to help you," Kinkel says.

Proceeds from Estero's calendar go to Partners in Breast Cancer, a local nonprofit group providing education and support for those with breast cancer, and the Estero Safety Fund, another nonprofit group offering fire and safety education to the community.

Their first fundraiser July 10 at Hyatt Place at Coconut Point raised \$1,700. Fifty percent of Bonita Fire Rescue's calendar proceeds go to the Bonita Springs Assistance Office, which screens and gives aid to local people in need.

The rest goes to other charitable causes, such as for smoke alarms and safety lessons for those who can't afford them, and a \$1,000 scholarship to an Estero High School graduate pursuing higher fire-related

education.

Bonita Springs Professional Firefighters Local 3444 union has raised almost \$65,000 for local charities and families in need through the last eight calendars. No funding for the calendar project comes from the fire district.

Now that Estero firefighters are heating up the competition, Bonita's calendar pros better work it, and work it good, the Estero crew says.

"It's all about pride in your community," Lindenmuth says.

Four-time Bonita calendar model Lt. Rich Lanza, 36, isn't getting hot and bothered about it. His rippling abs have been pictured in 2003, 2004, 2006 and now the 2011 calendar.

He knows about angles, lighting and which side is his good side. "My bad side is actually my good side," he says.

There's more to modeling besides looking hot enough to raise women's heart rates.

"With Estero, obviously they're rookies at this. It'll be a little friendly competition. We welcome the challenge," Lanza says.

What the new guys may not realize is the job entails much more than a pretty face and amazing abs.

"It seems like an easy concept. Get in shape, diet and take pictures," Lanza says. "But it's harder than I thought. You're out there and they're like 'be sexy,' and I'm like 'how do you do that?' I gotta give credit to those models."

Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that modeling duties last all year, with public appearances, calendar signings and speaking engagements.

Sparking loyal fans without letting it get out of control is another necessary skill. It is for charity, after all.

As the first fire district to try the calendar in Southwest Florida about nine years ago, Bonita knows its fans, says Bonita fire's public information officer Debbi Redfield.

Firefighters see the calendars all over. They get recognized in grocery stores. People want their autographs.

"It's the hot thing to have every page signed," Lanza says.

Grandparents buy the calendars for their granddaughters in college.

One woman buys the calendars for her 80-year-old mother in a nursing home up north, Redfield says.

"It's actually embarrassing. I went to get my hair cut and they had a calendar hanging up," Lanza says.

People even recognize them while they're on the job.

"On like 20 percent of my calls, they'll ask if I'm in the calendar," Lanza says.

That standing around looking steamy works up a sweat too, though. "Taking pictures is physically exhausting," Lanza says and pauses. "Maybe mentally draining. I went home and fell asleep on the couch."

Redfield laughs.

"Take him on a house fire and he's good. But a photo shoot and he's done," she says.

Many of Estero's firefighters hit the Publix bakery and then Five Guys for burgers and fries after their shoots.

Estero firefighters use oil on their chests to make their muscles gleam, Lindenmuth says. The Bonita firefighters don't.

"It's just sweat," Lanza says.

The most common question fans ask is their marital status.

So?

Kinkel is single.

Lanza has been married to Jennifer Lanza for 18 years. They have four children.

Jennifer Lanza is proud of her husband and likes to help him select the photos female fans will like.

"I'm flattered by the attention he gets," Jennifer says and laughs. "I get to brag 'don't you forget it ladies. I'm with him. He's mine.'"

No woman has been too inappropriate yet by stepping over any boundaries, she says.

Mostly the Lanza family enjoys the attention at birthday parties, the mall and from middle school teachers who ask their children for their dad's autograph on the calendars.

There's nothing wrong with having some fun between the emergencies they face on the job.

"It helps people see the firefighters in a different light, rather than just in an emergency setting," says Estero Fire Chief Scott Vanderbrook.

The firefighter models get ribbed by co-workers.

"I walk in, and they're like 'Oh, it's the calendar boy,'"
"Kinkel says, shaking his head in mock disgust.
"Jealousy."



Estero Fire Rescue firefighter Bill Kinkel is no stranger to the spotlight, but never with his shirt off as a calendar model. The firefighter's first calendar is for 2011. (Photos special to news-press.com)



Estero Fire Rescue firefighter Freddy Gonzalez poses for the camera.