Employee Spotlight: Kristen Honig

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In early May 2000, Kristen Honig, nowadays an infrastructure planner for the Laboratory, was studying for college exams as the Cerro Grande Fire threatened her hometown of Los Alamos 350 miles away. After the fire had been successfully contained, she attended a firefighter appreciation event at Ashley Pond and met some of the firefighters who had battled the blaze. The relationships Honig formed that day, and the insights she gained into the firefighting way of life, left a lasting impression.

Honig eventually realized that she wanted to join the firefighting community in her own right, but in a way that would allow her to document the beauty and destructiveness of wildfires and the sacrifices, challenges and camaraderie of the men and women protecting communities in the path of the scorching flames.

Using high school and college photography courses as a foundation, Honig boldly picked up the phone one day and called the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) to ask about the requirements for becoming a wildfire photographer. A nice lady in the NIFC's External Affairs department explained that a limited number of photographers were under contract with the agency, but that firefighting experience was a prerequisite.

"I was studying interior design at the time—a subject far removed from fighting fires," Honig recalls with a smile, "but I took the nice lady'sadvice and used spring break 2002 to complete the basic firefighting courses and physical fitness test."

Honig was fortunate as well. "My mom was volunteering at Bandelier National Monument and mentioned my firefighting and photography interests to a fire managers there," Honig notes. "Since Bandelier happened to have additional firefighting funds that season because of extremely dry weather conditions, I was added to one of Bandelier's fire engine crews."

Photography from the fireline

During her first summer as a firefighter, Honig assisted fire managers during a two-week detail at the U.S. Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Coordination Center in Denver, Colorado; served on an Incident Management Team overseeing the Trampas and Roybal Fires in the Santa Fe National Forest; and was on the fireline actively battling fires across New Mexico and Oregon, including Oregon's 500,000-acre Biscuit Fire.

The next year Honig photographed several fires as a freelance photographer and soon thereafter became a contract NIFC photojournalist, visually capturing major fires in the western United States on an on#call basis, including the 2011 Las Conchas and 2013 Thompson Ridge Fires in New Mexico. Although now pursuing a full-time career at the Laboratory as her primary occupation, Honig has remained under contract with the NIFC for the past 12 years and is prepared to leave for new fires at a moment's notice. She updates her firefighter qualifications each spring, fulfilling the same physical and training requirements as crews on the line.

Honig's firefighting background has served her well. "When I first arrive at a fire," Honig explains, "the crews think of me as 'press,' someone who is going to take a few quick pictures from the road using a very long lens. Their attitude shifts once they realize that I am a trained firefighter and often hike alongside them to the fireline, carrying much of the usual firefighting gear as well as my photographic equipment."

To earn the respect and trust of the on-scene crews is important to Honig. "I'm in awe of the firefighting community," Honig says. "The firefighters are so passionate about helping people that they are willing to not only put their lives in danger but to place their lives on hold for extended periods of time. A typical assignment on a large fire requires tours that last two to three weeks and often lack even the most basic conveniences. The crews eat, sleep and work together all summer long, essentially serving as a family unit when they are away from home. I'm honored when they accept me as one of their own."

Honig works for the Operations and Infrastructure Program Office's Infrastructure Planning group.

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More

- Flickr photo gallery of additional fire images by Kristen Honig
- KOB TV's 2013 interview with Kristen Honig