

# KATHERINE DARGAN

BY SCOTT ROARK

## KATHERINE DARGAN (NRM '89) IS ON FIRE.

And more than bad puns are needed to describe how her career is heating up: Dargan was recently appointed California's first female fire marshal by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Dargan started battling fires with the CDF in Santa Cruz County in 1977 and was promoted to fire captain and fire apparatus engineer in San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties shortly after.

Harrowing experiences followed. In the early 1980s, Dargan was battling a horrendous brushfire on the east side of Cuesta Grade, near San Luis Obispo. A fire crew from Monterey ended up at the bottom of the canyon, cut off from all communication, unaware they were completely surrounded by advancing flames.

Dargan and her crew also were surrounded, but in communication with other firefighters. As the inferno raged, her crew parked the engines, hiking down to the canyon's bottom to warn the other crew. Everyone got out of the canyon just in the nick of time. Due to a process called "area ignition," where large areas ignite all at once due to heat build-up, the canyon almost instantly was in flames as the crews hiked back to the engines. The crews then managed to continue safely by using the engines to cut a path through a ring of fire.

Experiences like these shaped Dargan's leadership style, and she admits it was a challenge being a woman in a predominately male culture.

"Be decisive. That's one thing I've learned over the years," she said. "People value individuals who can make decisions and build relationships."

Dargan carried these skills into positions later in her career, which included fire marshal for Napa County and battalion chief for a CDF air attack base in Nevada County.

The 48-year-old Napa resident and mother of three credits much of her career success to her experience at Cal Poly and its trademark approach to instruction.

She remembers natural resources management Professor James Vilkitis in particular, calling him a mentor and advisor. "He was a huge influence on me," said Dargan. "He taught critical thinking with very little memorization. From his 'systems' approach of instruction, I learned to take a situation apart and then restructure it to find solutions."

Dargan plans to incorporate her Cal Poly education and her career experiences as she tackles her new duties. To enhance the fire services training program, she will add professional training and public speaking courses, along with additional courses in fire education and fire prevention. "There's a lot more to our field than just putting out fires," she said.

Additionally, during her four-year term, she would like to bring a variety of land-urban interface issues to the forefront in the coming decade, including watershed and forest management. □

