

Jason Kline battles High Park blaze near Fort Collins

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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1994 GHS graduate is Colorado fire fighter

One of the devastating fires that rolled across Colorado in June and July involved a Gothenburg High School graduate.

Jason Kline, who graduated in 1994, is a Breckenridge, CO, fire fighter who was deployed to fight the giant blaze near Fort Collins known as the High Park fire.

“The fire behavior was like nothing I have ever seen,” said the captain with the Red, White and Blue Fire District. “Acres of trees burning at one time.”

Kline described the area, riddled with trees killed by the mountain pine bark beetle, as candles waiting to be lit.

“We were getting smoke columns 35,000 to 40,000 feet high,” he said.

For Kline, fire fighting has been a lifelong dream. His father, Dave Kline, was a volunteer fire fighter in Gothenburg. His uncle, Kent Kline, is still a member. Jason Kline started volunteering for the Gothenburg Fire Department and later moved to Colorado.

He started as a volunteer for the Red, White and Blue district in 1999 and was hired full time in 2002.

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His department handles everything from medical calls, fires, wild land fires, technical rescue (rope, structure collapse, trench, confined space rescues) and any other emergency that is called into the district.

Kline is certified in structure fires, HazMat operations, as an emergency medical technician, in technical rescue and is a wildland engine boss, which means he's in charge of a fire engine when the unit is called.



On June 12, he was deployed to the High Park fire in Fort Collins along with a fire engine and two other people.

The High Park fire, he said, was a Type 1 which means the largest number of fire fighters and the best trained management team with the most experience had been assigned to fight it.

“The team is qualified to manage the largest and most complex events,” Kline said.

The classification also meant lots of people were assigned to the fire, which by the time he arrived, had already blackened 55,000 acres and had burned 120 structures.

His unit was assigned to a division 45 miles west of Fort Collins, along the Poudre River, about five to seven miles in front of the fire. The division consisted of three task forces of engines, he said, noting that five to seven engines and personnel make up a task force.

Their job was to prepare seven structures in case the fire front hit.

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“We set up sprinklers and hose lines to help keep the structures from burning when the fire hit our line,” Kline said. “Our division was also the line where they wanted to stop the fire from moving west.”

To hold the line, the crew worked near a dirt road cutting trees and clearing brush. Fire fighters also laid 2,000 feet of hose over ridges to help knock and slow down the fire near a hand-dug line.

After two days, Kline said the blaze was still about four to five miles away and burning about a half to three quarters of a mile each day.

His group “spiked” camp near the fire line which meant setting up and taking down camp each day “because we never knew what was going to happen.”

For the first few days, fire fighters survived on military MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) and food stored in the engine.

“Not bad but not great either,” he said.

When the fire rolled to about three quarters of a mile of his unit’s location, members were evacuated to a safety zone—an area where apparatus and personnel can be contained safely—for about three hours.

But before that, Kline said the fire crept closer to their line and “the firing branch” (a group trained to use back burns to slow down the fire) used drip torches to set back burns from the road and enlarge the fire line before the blaze reached the road.

Back burns, Kline said, can be a way to reduce the amount of flammable material during a bush

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fire by starting small fires along a man made or natural firebreak in front of a main fire front. Small fires started are designed to burn back towards the main fire.

At one point, Kline directed a pilot in a helicopter that poured water on hot spots.

“He would dip water from the Poudre River and dump it from his bucket on the areas where I told him to go,” Kline explained. “We also used the engine to help put out anything within 100 feet of the road.”

Fortunately, the structures he helped prepare didn't burn and the fire didn't jump the road.

Once it was safe enough to return, the crew made sure hot spots and small fires had been extinguished.

The total duration of the fire-fighting effort for Kline was 16 days which began with a 5:30 a.m. briefing, and lasted until about 10 p.m.

In addition to the Fort Collins fire, Kline has been deployed to fight other fires in Colorado, Florida, Louisiana and the Monument fire in Arizona.

When he's not fighting fires or working at the fire station in Breckenridge, Kline likes to spend time with his family and ride his bike.

Kline married Megan Folkers, also a 1997 graduate of GHS, who's a real estate agent in Denver. The couple, who live in Littleton, have two children: Cadence, 8; and Camden, 6.

After high school graduation, Kline attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for a year, Mid-Plains Community College in North Platte for a year before enrolling in Colorado Mountain

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College to get a fire science degree.

When asked what he'd like readers to know about fires, Kline pointed out that fires can happen to anyone.

"Be prepared and know what you would take with you if you only had minutes to get out."

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