



NOVEMBER 2, 2023 | ISSUE 74

Rattle Watch

Proudly informing South Carolina firefighters.



From CTC to FOA: An interview with Austin Elgin

Intentional is a word that keeps coming up for Anderson City Fire Department Engineer **Austin Elgin**. It's a word – or, better yet, a motto of sorts – used repeatedly during the Fire Officer Academy program he attended in early October. It is important for students of the program to know that everything they go through that week, and everything they went through to get to that point, was designed with purpose, care, and detail. They cannot yet see the fruits of their labor but have to believe that the seeds planted will blossom.

“Trust the process,” they’re told.

Austin absorbed what he was being taught throughout that week, much like he has for the last decade. He’s dedicated to learning as much about the craft as he can and is eager to better himself for the people around him. Despite being young, despite being an Engineer, and despite the “what if’s” of comparison that plagued him, Austin thrived at the Fire Officer Academy.

It wasn’t all that long ago that Austin was a student at Belton Honea-Path and enrolled in the Career and Technology Center firefighter program. The son and grandson of volunteer firefighters and already a Junior firefighter with Rocks Springs in Belton, Austin was willing to give firefighting a go, but had his sights set on a career in the medical field.

"I had plans on being a physical therapist," he said. Enter **Luke Riddle**, former Firefighter instructor at the Anderson District II Career and Technology Center.

"From the moment I waked in the door, I felt like I was held to a different standard because Luke knew my dad," Austin said. "I think he expected a little bit more of me."

Luke had a profound impact on Austin, mentoring him through his junior and senior years of high school and encouraging him to pursue higher education. Austin graduated high school with both Firefighter I and Firefighter II; he was officially job-ready certified.

"Luke took the time to mentor us... he could see what we couldn't see in us," Austin said about his CTC instructor, friend, and mentor. "At the time we didn't understand fully what we were getting into. He did a great job putting us in situations where, 'Hey, you're going to have to deal with this and stuff you've never seen before.'"

Those physical therapy plans never came to fruition. Instead, after a few hiccups along the way, Austin graduated from Anderson University with a degree in Emergency Management. He holds a few jobs now, one being his full-time gig at Anderson City Fire and another being part-time at the Anderson County Emergency Management.

"I honestly don't think I'd be where I am [without Luke] in all honesty, cause I had a completely different path in mind than firefighting," Austin continued. "It was a combination of him and getting the experience on the volunteer side that opened up the gates."

Austin was promoted to Engineer almost four years to the day after he was hired. His eagerness to learn and his work ethic stood out to Anderson City Fire **Chief Charlie King**. Chief King and Anderson Fire are big supporters of the Association and regularly send members to our trainings and events. When the first Fire Officer Academy: The Company Officer class graduated in May 2022, Anderson City Fire Lt. **Brandon Stroud** was among them.

"This is a special program that needs to remain special and selective," Lt. Stroud said after graduation. "Granted, all officers need to go through this program, but I don't believe all will get the message and the purpose of the program. I don't consider myself elite by any means, but I believe this program is elite."

Applications for the October offering of the Fire Officer Academy opened in early June 2023. Austin received a text from Chief King letting him know he thought he'd benefit from the program. Austin talked to Lt. Stroud to get the opinion of someone who'd been there. It took some time and a lot of personal reflection, but Austin finally sat down to apply.

"I honestly didn't think I was ready for it," Austin admitted. "But chief believed in me, and I had to really sit and think about where I was, where I wanted to be, how I wanted to go about it, and then apply and see what happens. Even through that whole thing, there was some self-doubt here and there."

Austin's resume, cover letter, and application were impressive; after making it through the initial selection, Austin then had to complete

dozens of hours of online work to make the final roster. He credits his college experience in helping him excel throughout the entire application process. In the end, Austin was among only 25 selected to attend the Fire Officer Academy 23-02.

Research tells us first impressions are formed in the first seven seconds of meeting; when the FOA 23-02 cohort met for the first time, Austin immediately took notice of the seniority in the room.

“I walked in the door and there was a lot of white helmets, lot of red helmets, lots of lieutenants and captains,” he continued, “and here I am with a bright yellow shield that says Engineer on it.”

It took a few days before he felt like he belonged. It was during an evening bay session listening to the likes of **Bruce Kline** and **Joe Palmer** that Austin realized he was exactly where he needed to be, doing exactly what he needed to be doing.

“Yes, I’m young, but I’m gaining that same experience and I belong here because I’m not doing anything but learning and gaining valuable experience for the future,” he said. “No matter if I’m an officer or not, this is going to benefit me more than anything I have ever taken.”

When asked about what has changed since he graduated from the Fire Officer Academy, Austin’s answer was simple: his attitude.

“I’ve learned that everything we do for our community and people we work with is absolutely intentional and all to better them. Everything that we do is for them,” Austin said, recalling an iteration of the Fire Officer Academy’s ‘They Come First’ mantra found in the FOA creed.

In many ways, Austin’s career has come full circle. He’s talking to the CTC kids who come to Anderson twice a week, just like he did. He’s giving back to the community that raised him. He’s intentional with how he spends his time on shift.

“Taking the time to invest in our people, taking the time to invest in them, taking the time to go train with your company, taking time to find something to do that is going to benefit the department as a whole, has become one of the things I’ve been trying to do,” Austin said.

What’s next for someone when they’ve graduated high school, earned a college degree, and completed the Fire Officer Academy in less than a decade?

“I haven’t sat down and thought about what the end goal is,” Austin admitted before wrapping up to head to job number three. He has a habit of sticking with things—Austin’s been working at a local Christmas tree farm every holiday season since high school.

We’re glad he stuck with the fire service, too.



We're seeking our next chaplain

Fire chaplains have a unique and often challenging role in a department. They are tasked with helping departments and families navigate life during an emotionally turbulent time, like after a particularly difficult call or injury of a firefighter. Chaplains are typically the spiritual epicenter for the department in addition to their post-event responsibilities.

Being a chaplain is a heavy burden to carry, but of the utmost importance for the wellbeing of the department.

Long-time Association chaplain Gary Rogers retired from the position at the end of Fire-Rescue 2023 in June. He served as the state's fire service chaplain for 13 years and was an instrumental player in advancing the role of chaplaincy.

Now that Reverend Rogers is following his next calling, the Association has the responsibility of [seeking our next chaplain](#).

The job summary reads, "The chaplain is one who takes on the role of providing spiritual and other support to those in the fire service and those affected by emergency crisis. The chaplain is a member of the leadership team of the Association and provides for the pastoral needs of the committees, membership, and staff of the South Carolina State Firefighters' Association. The chaplain, through training and certification, assists the individuals and groups in the understanding of life's events as they relate to spiritual, and emotional well-being through the offering of consultation, prayers, and formal services. The chaplain will be reimbursed for any expenses incurred as a result of the above or other Association duties. The Chaplain will serve at the pleasure of the Executive Committee for the duration of the desire term of office."

Dorchester County Fire Marshal and longtime Association committee member **Rickie Jenkins** is spearheading our efforts as chair of the Chaplain Search Committee.

Rickie's especially qualified for the role – he's a United Methodist certified Lay Servant, oversees worship services on Sundays, and will offer messages to the congregation on occasion. He is also a licensed Funeral Director and Mortician and has training on helping families during bereavement.

"We are looking for a Chaplain that can reach not only to our firefighters but also to their families," Rickie said. "Someone that can bring a

message that will be universal to reach out and be a comfort to a person that maybe looking for guidance in the walk with Christ. Someone that will be there for the members of the Association and not there for what the Association can do for them. Someone that can give our executive board spiritual leadership.”

The chaplain position is open till filled. While the Committee understands the importance of a timely decision, finding the right person for the job is priority.

“We are not pressed to make a quick decision,” Rickie continued. “We want the right person for the position.”

Questions about the position and resumes should be directed to Deputy Director [Jamie Helms](#).



FSIC course spotlight: Grain Bin Rescue

Grain Bin Rescue, January 18-19, 2024 during Fire Service Improvement Conference, is for emergency responders who may be called to rescue someone trapped in a grain bin or at a grain handling or storage facility.

Grain bin accidents can be incredibly dangerous if not approached with the proper training and equipment. This course is designed to provide emergency responders with the knowledge and skills needed to carry out a safe and effective rescue operation. Students will learn about the various types of grain bins and the hazards associated with them, as well as the proper use of equipment such as harnesses, ropes, and ventilation systems, and tips on locating, securing, and moving the victim.

Additionally, the course covers topics such as teamwork, communication, and incident command, all of which are essential factors in a successful rescue operation. By taking the Grain Bin Rescue course, emergency responders will be better equipped to handle the unique challenges of grain bin rescues and will be able to provide a safer and more effective response to those in need.

[Register](#) for Grain Bin Rescue during **Fire Service Improvement Conference**. See you in January!





From GoRail: Expanding AskRail Access to ECCs

U.S. freight railroads came together in 2014 to launch [AskRail](#), an innovative mobile app that enables first responders to view the contents of a train or see if a railcar is carrying hazmat. Since then, nearly 50,000 emergency personnel in 49 states have downloaded the tool.

Now railroads are trying to expand access by encouraging Emergency Communications Centers (ECCs) to integrate AskRail data into their operations. The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) on July 13 [issued](#) a Safety Advisory encouraging 911 Call Centers to integrate, train on and use AskRail.

A new training module specifically for ECCs as well as instructions on how to gain access and install AskRail on internet-ready devices is available at www.askrail.us.

“We wanted to be able to provide first responders real-time information, not just printed out copies and some of the old ways of doing things,” [says](#) Andy Elkins, director of hazmat compliance at the Association of American Railroads.

“Many firefighters and first responders across the country may never see a rail-related incident, but if it does occur, we want to make sure they have the best training—that they have successfully planned, trained for, and are able to mitigate these incidents.”

South Carolina’s 11 freight railroads operate 2,191 miles of track, safely and efficiently connecting the U.S. economy. Rigorous operating standards alongside investment into the rail network has led to consistent safety gains—the last decade was the safest ever for railroads according to the Federal Railroad Administration. But incidents do still occur, and railroads have prioritized first responder training and coordination.

AskRail helps emergency personnel identify railcars carrying hazardous material such as petrochemicals as well as the location of key community assets—like schools, rivers, and heavily populated neighborhoods—that are more vulnerable to contamination. It also offers tailored guidance and connects to emergency services for all major Class I railroads and Amtrak.

Railroads also train about 20,000 state and local emergency responders every year on handling rail incidents. About 2,000 of these officials receive immersive training with full-scale scenarios at the world-class Security and Emergency Response Training Center ([SERTC](#)) in Pueblo, Colorado. SERTC is a member of the National Domestic Preparedness Consortium (NDPC), which fully funds local, state, tribal and territorial first

responders to attend any of SERTC's DHS/FEMA-certified courses. You can find the 2023 course schedule [here](#).

Additionally, TRANSCAER (Transportation Community Awareness Emergency Response) is an outreach program covering North America. It focuses on assisting communities and training emergency responders to prepare for and respond to hazardous material transportation incidents. In-person training events as well as virtual assets can be found at www.transcaer.com.

For more information contact GoRail's South Carolina state director, [Christy Sammon](#).

Firefighter Injury Prevention Research Study



Who can participate?

- Any career firefighter cleared for fire suppression duties.

Overall Objectives?

- Reduce injuries and advance slip, trip, and fall protection.

For more information, please contact: UNC-Firefighter-Research@unc.edu



IRB #21-2508





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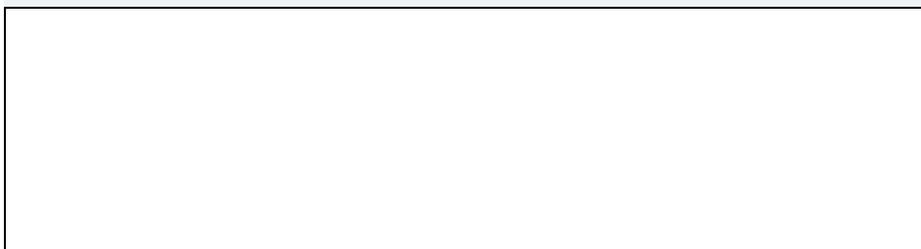
UNC research project needs participants

The **MOTION Science Institute at the University of North Carolina** is conducting critical research across the Carolinas and Virginia to improve firefighter health and safety. Dr. Ryan and his team are performing a NIOSH funded research project to reduce injuries and advance slip, trip, and fall protection. These research projects are critical to help us improve and advocate for advances in firefighter health and safety.

We are excited to support their work—please consider partnering with them on this important project! [Contact the team](#) or find project details [here](#).



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From our partners at Homes for Heroes: 10 Tips for Home Sellers

As you consider buying or selling your home, we want to introduce you to an incredible opportunity that will not only simplify the process, but can also make a significant impact on your financial well-being. We are proud to partner with **Homes for Heroes**, an organization that goes above and beyond to serve our community heroes and their families.

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- *Expertise:* You'll work with highly skilled and experienced Real Estate and Lending Specialists who will help you navigate the complexities of buying or selling a home.
- *Community Involvement:* By working with Homes for Heroes, you join a network of individuals and organizations dedicated to giving back. In addition to that, Homes for Heroes donates a portion of each transaction back to our foundation, as well as the Homes for Heroes Foundation.

We understand that buying or selling a home is one of the most significant decisions you'll make, and Homes for Heroes is committed to

making it as smooth and rewarding as possible. By working with one of their specialists, you not only earn cash back and benefit from their expertise, but you also contribute to a meaningful cause that supports our own community heroes.

We recommend considering Homes for Heroes as your trusted partner in your real estate journey. They look forward to the opportunity to serve you, and continue to express their gratitude to our heroes nationwide.

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- [January 18-21 - Fire Service Improvement Conference](#)
- February 3, 2024 - Firefighter Memorial Service
- [March 3-8, 2024 - Fire Officer Academy: The Company Officer 24-01](#)
- April 17, 2024 - Legislative Day
- [June 12-15, 2024 - Fire-Rescue](#)



South Carolina State Firefighters' Association

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