



■ Working on Fire workers filling up the tanker of the truck with water.



■ Working on Fire's Tumelo Mokoatsi working at the tap to fill the tank.



■ Ronnie Ngamlana puts on his safety gear ahead of a hard day's work.

Fighting fire

KAYLYNN PALM

With his yellow and red gear, the Working on Fire firefighter Tumelo Mokoatsi, 29, is passionate about public safety and nature, and wouldn't give up his extinguisher for any office job.

At first it was a teenage dream, but in 2011 it became his occupation, fighting fires in velds, forests and mountains. Mr Mokoatsi is a supervisor at the False Bay branch of Working on Fire, in Rocklands, and over the past two months has been hard at work fighting multiple fires around the Cape Peninsula.

"During the summer season there have been many fires across the City. It's tough and hot, but weirdly, I tend to enjoy my job. Fighting fires isn't an easy task, because fires grow, change direction and the wind makes your job even more challenging.

"I am in this industry because I care about nature and animals. We live in a beautiful city we should embrace nature and take care of it," he said.

Mr Mokoatsi started working as a fireman in Free State and then in 2013 he was transferred to the Western Cape where he worked at Porterville and Jonkershoek.

He said firefighters, at the very least, are required to be fit, brave, determined and excellent team players.

"I always admired the job of a fireman when I was younger. They were seen as unselfish people, like a hero. I then applied at Working on Fire, went to do a fitness test, did the interview and then a medical test, after that I was successful," he said.

Mr Mokoatsi said he has wonderful, supportive team members who work hard – especially in the field.

"If there is one thing that I will remember when being a firefighter, it is safety first.

"You cannot go into a job being scared or doubtful, you need to be confident and positive.

"You need to be aware of your surroundings and alert your colleagues about potential dangers. We spend hours out in the field, and in most cases we sleep on site," he said.

Mr Mokoatsi's typical day starts with a morning parade, followed by a fitness test once a week and if there are no fires, they do safety and educational talks at the site, schools or libraries.

"There are times when there are no fires, so we try and entertain ourselves by playing games, but when we get that fire call, we are on our feet, ready for business," he said.

Working on Fire is a national veld and forest fire fighting resource under the auspices of the Department of Environmental Affairs and it has close to 5 000 firefighters stationed at 200 bases throughout the country.

The programme provides veldfire suppression support to the provinces, Disaster Management Centres, Fire Protection Associations and landowners like South African National Parks and CapeNature.

Helping hands

Hundreds of Working on Fire firefighters provided fire suppression services to authorities in battling more than 70 intense veld fires throughout the province since December last year.

The latest fires in the Cape Peninsula which included Red Hill/ Scarborough and De Waal Drive, and in the Overberg which included Standford and Baardskeedersbos.

Linton Rensburg, national communications manager at Working on Fire said close to 200 firefighters were



■ Tumelo Mokoatsi steps outside the firetruck.



■ Ronnie Ngamlana ensures that the lid on the water tanker is safely replaced.

active in the field.

In addition, eight helicopters and four fixed wing spotter planes and four fixed wing water bombers were active in these fires during the last week.

He said in the Peninsula fires, firefighters had barely finished extinguishing a fire on De Waal Drive in Cape Town, when more resources had to be dispatched to the Red Hill/ Scarborough fire.

"We experienced 99 fires throughout the country during December 2015 with a total loss of 39 000 ha. A total of 1 300 firefighters, were active on these fires.

"Our firefighters continue to remain on high alert and a national deployment team of firefighters are ready to be dispatched to the Western Cape and other hotspot areas throughout the country," he said.

Mr Rensburg said firefighters go through extensive training, and are characterised by their fitness, discipline and exceptional work ethic and bravery.

"Many of these firefighters who spend days and nights on end fighting these fires come from communities on the Cape Flats and Khayalitsha.

"The programme is instrumental in fighting these fires and ultimately their ground teams, who were active and often unseen in high up the mountains, and their aerial support, made up the biggest part of this week's operations," he said.

Working on Fire was launched in September 2003 as part of the South African Government's initiative to create jobs and to alleviate poverty.

● Emergency contact details for the Newlands Dispatch Centre are 082 312 9413 or 021 689 7438 or call the City of Cape Town Regional Fire Control (RFC) on 021 590 1900.