

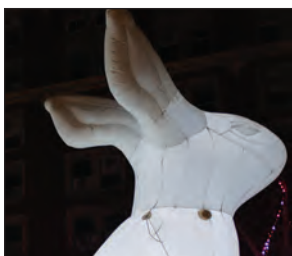
TRAVERSING THROUGH THE SMOKE



Despite self-imposed and external hardships, female firefighters overcome challenges every day to better help their communities, with support systems backing them each step of the way.

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INSIDE

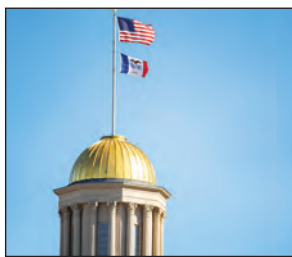


80 HOURS: Iowa City Downtown District's Winter Night Lights dazzle Iowa City

This February, six massive blow-up rabbits are taking over the Pedestrian Mall in the Downtown District for its Winter Night Lights.

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ONLINE



Federal financial aid drops for fifth consecutive year at Iowa's public institutions

Institutional financial aid increased 6 percent at state Board of Regents institutions while federal financial aid decreased.

UPCOMING

The artificial intelligence generator ChatGPT has been nationally popularized on university campuses as a new way to cheat. Some University of Iowa students who spoke to the *DI* are using the tool to cheat — and some professors aren't noticing.



Watch for campus and city news, weather, and Hawkeye sports coverage at dailyiowan.com



Xtream Arena draws customers to Coralville

The arena continues to bring people and business to the River Landing after two years of operation.



Daniel McGregor-Huyer/The Daily Iowan

Fire is set ablaze during day two of the 2022 Soldier Salute College Wrestling Tournament at Xtream Arena in Coralville, Iowa, on Dec. 30, 2022.

Natalie Miller
News Reporter

Since the Xtream Arena's opening in September 2020, its economic impact sparked the growth of businesses in the Iowa River Landing and Coralville areas.

Over 5,000 Xtream Arena patrons flood the Iowa River Landing during events. The arena, located at 200 E. 9th St., is home to the University of Iowa's volleyball team and the Iowa Heartlanders' professional minor league hockey team. It was slated to have an economic impact of over \$1.4 billion over a 20-year period, according to the City of Coralville.

Coralville Mayor Meghann Foster said the Iowa River Landing has seen more visitors since the arena's opening.

"It is not unusual to see on the weekends and

during the week when we have these big events to see a lot of foot traffic, a lot of actual traffic, and people not only enjoying the event they came to the area for but enjoying all the other amenities the River Landing has to offer," Foster said.

The arena hosts concerts, high school sporting events, UI sporting events, and various rec and club sporting events.

Restaurants in the area such as Tribute Eatery and Bar and 30Hop Coralville are located directly across from Xtream Arena. Employees at both institutions said they often see a surge in business on days when big events take place across the street.

Tribute Eatery and Bar opened November 2020 — shortly after Xtream Arena's opening — general manager Blake Laughton said.

The restaurant has protocol measures put in

XTREAM | Page 5A

UI to sell Mayflower, build new dorm

The residence hall could be sold and closed by spring 2024 if approved by the state Board of Regents at its Feb. 22 meeting.

Kate Perez
News Editor

Mayflower Residence Hall, which was first built in 1968 and became housing for University of Iowa students in 1982, is set to be sold to make way for a new residence hall, the university announced Tuesday.

The UI announced in an Iowa Now article its plans to sell the building and construct a new dorm with 250-400 beds on the east side of campus to house second, third, and fourth-year students in a university-owned location.

Potential locations for the new residence hall include:

- Behind Stanley and Currier Halls
- Next to Alpha Chi Sigma fraternity on North Clinton Street
- The Recreation Center parking lot located on West Court Street
- The Hillcrest Parking Lot at the end of Byington Road

The residence hall is expected to draw students to the main university campus and dining halls, according to the Iowa Now article. The university received research and feedback from students about the current housing system, the article stated.

The *Daily Iowan* reached out to the UI on Jan. 30 about the future plans for Mayflower Hall and the construction of a new dorm.

"The university is always proactively evaluating its housing and dining systems to best serve students who choose to live on campus," Tricia Brown, senior director of internal communications and media relations, wrote in an email to the *DI*.

"The university is in the process of

DORM | Page 5A



Grace Smith/The Daily Iowan

Cedar Rapids firefighter of nine years Megan Wichmann, 30, scans the area after responding to a call on Jan. 2. Wichmann became a firefighter in 2014 after obtaining her EMS and fire science certificates and degrees from Kirkwood Community College in 2013.



Grace Smith/The Daily Iowan

Firefighters Wichmann, Michael McFarlane, Shelby Van Weelden, Zack Howell, and Jake Bawek test their ladder skills at a training tower in Cedar Rapids on Jan. 2. In her time in the fire service, Wichmann said she's been treated very well on the management and crew level and has the support one needs in the CRFD. "We're here 24 hours a day; we experience the same calls," Wichmann said. "Working with these people day in and day out, you forge a very special bond with them."

FIREFIGHTERS
Continued from Front

Grace Smith
Photojournalist

Megan Wichmann sat in her high school English classroom in 2009 and contemplated her new assignment for the month: Pick a career and research it. Wichmann was interested in shadowing a paramedic, so she went on a few ambulance ride-alongs in Johnson County.

Wichmann's mother's partner at the time was an Iowa City firefighter, and he asked Wichmann if she wanted to ride along in a firetruck for the day. Wichmann quickly accepted, eager for every experience she was offered.

"I think that's honestly where I fell in love with firefighting because I get to do EMS and fire," the Iowa native said. "Then, it kind of took off from there."

And with each ride-along and conversation, Wichmann's passion for helping others grew stronger.

Twenty days after Wichmann graduated from Iowa City High School, she went on a ride-along at Station Five in Cedar Rapids. After obtaining her EMS and fire science certificates and degrees from Kirkwood Community College in 2013,

Wichmann sat in the same station as a paid Cedar Rapids firefighter in 2014.

Since then, the 30-year-old has jumped from station to station and absorbed as much information as possible, connecting with coworkers and bettering the community, which she said she cares deeply about.

"You never know what the day has in store for you," Wichmann said. "So, just being able to roll with the punches or adapt and overcome is kind of the motto for me."

Wichmann said community risk reduction is a large part of why she loves being a firefighter.

"I love hearing stories. [Community members] even say, 'I remember coming to the fire station when I was in preschool,' and this could be like a 30- or 40-year-old civilian coming in, and they remember that piece of their life," Wichmann said. "I just enjoy the heck out of it."

During her nine years in the field, Wichmann said there have been times when community members come up to her and said, "I've never seen a female firefighter." They'll even come up and ask for a photo.

"My initial reaction is to let out a belly laugh," Wichmann said. "Whenever

anybody wants to come station, up and engage in conversation, I'm all for it ... I love the fact that people are inquisitive — young and old."

Challenges for female firefighters

The National Fire Protection Association estimated female firefighters made up 9 percent — around 89,600 — of 1.04 million career and volunteer firefighters in the U.S. in 2020. The Cedar Rapids Fire Department has eight female firefighters.

Amy Kunkle, Cedar Rapids Fire Department fire and explosives investigator, said she's experienced challenges being a woman in the fire service, including self-imposed hardships.

"It feels like, as a woman, you have to prove yourself more than a male does," Kunkle said. "And I'm not saying that's reality. It's just kind of something that myself and others that I work with feel."

Kunkle, who is 45 years old, has worked at the department since 2008. She found there are many benefits to having female firefighters out in the field.

She said even though men may naturally be built physically bigger and stronger, there are a lot of circumstances where bigger isn't better.

One day on the job, Kunkle and her coworkers responded to a house fire. As Kunkle was circling the home and looking for potential victims and fire hazards, she noticed the department's hose nozzle was placed on the wrong side of the fence. So, Kunkle had to hop over a fence quickly to start putting water on the fire as soon as possible.

"I wouldn't be in the field if I didn't believe that I could do it," Kunkle said.

Jennifer Alexander, a preschool teacher at Cadence Academy in Iowa City and a volunteer firefighter for the Coralville Fire Department, said she bears external hardships in the fire service.

Alexander is a 5-foot tall, 125-pound woman in the fire service. She said people sometimes underestimate her skills because of her stature and her gender.

Alexander said gear is an unexpected challenge she experiences daily. She said she wishes gear was more accessible and fit women better so they could complete tasks to the best of their ability without having inappropriately-sized gear slowing them down.

"We have to do the same work as men — in gear that's not designed to fit

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IC Fire Department faces lawsuit

Sadie McDowell, a former employee, shared alleged accounts of sexism, racism, and homophobia from her former coworkers.



Matt Sindt/The Daily Iowan

An Iowa City firetruck is seen at the Iowa City Fire Station 1 Headquarters on Oct. 12, 2022.

Jami Martin-Trainor
Assistant Digital Editor

The Iowa City Fire Department is currently facing a discrimination lawsuit after former employee Sadie McDowell reported the unit for accounts of sexism, racism, and homophobia. The trial is currently set for July 30 to Aug. 12, 2024, according to Amy Beck, an attorney working on McDowell's case.

The official court documents were electronically filed on Aug. 10, 2022. The case is still open and under litigation. As of the time the document was filed, McDowell was technically employed by the Iowa City Fire Department as a firefighter, but she was not being paid and was not allowed to return to work. McDowell said her employment officially ended in January.

In the 19-page lawsuit, McDowell describes the reported discriminatory actions she observed from her colleagues, both directed to her and others.

This includes officers intentionally looping in the downtown Iowa City area to "ogle young women and comment on their bodies and/or clothing," which was referred to as the "the Lust Lap."

McDowell also describes a situation that occurred in the summer of 2017 where she faced "unwanted and non-consensual kissing and sexual groping" from a colleague.

In response to these allegations, the Iowa City Fire Department denied all claims made in the lawsuit. In a statement to *The Daily Iowan* from Lee Hermiston, Iowa City's public safety information officer, the city's official reply is limited for legal purposes.

"The City of Iowa City is committed to supporting the rights of all employees and creating a safe, inclusive, and respectful work environment. These are allegations only," Hermiston stated.

When the document was filed, four women were employed at the fire department, which was made up of 65 people. As of Feb. 8, the number of women in the Iowa City fire department has decreased to one, according to data received by the *DI* from Hermiston.

The disproportionate number of men and women in emergency services is not limited to the fire department. The number of men sworn into the Iowa City Police department was 69 while the number of women was 11, as of Feb. 8.

Allegations in the document also include instances of racism, homophobia, and transphobia. The document states McDowell reportedly heard a lieutenant say a Black homeless man "was not worth the skin on his bones," and several coworkers frequently used the word "gay" in a derogatory manner. Other allegations claim the male firefighters would mock transgender individuals and refuse to respect their preferred pronouns and chosen name.

As a whole, McDowell states in the lawsuit that the treatment of herself and others has drastically and negatively impacted her mental health.

"This ordeal has caused Sadie to develop a myriad of debilitating symptoms and mental health conditions including Major Depressive Disorder and Other Trauma and Stressor Related Disorder," the document reads.

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FIREFIIGHTERS

Continued from 2A

us using tools that aren't designed with us in mind — and have to be able to do it at the same standard of quality and efficacy as men," Alexander said.

Alexander said the department is aware of issues with her gear not fitting. But because of cost and gear being normally purchased in bulk, the department is not able to provide her with properly-fitting gear. However, she said the department has been able to accommodate her with inexpensive equipment including suitable structure gloves.

Alexander said, along with the constraints of gear, she sometimes feels restrained when using her voice and asserting herself in situations.

"If a woman is assertive and a little aggressive, they're a b****," Alexander said. "But if a man is aggressive and standing

his ground, he's just being assertive."

She said it often feels like high school all over again.

"If you get the highest score on a math test, everyone hates you because you set the curve," Alexander said. "But if you're the captain or the quarterback for the football team or the star basketball player, and you score the winning points, it's announced on the loudspeaker how great and awesome you are."

Overcoming adversity in the fire service

Some women have been actively battling constraints in the fire service for years, Julie Popelka, a current firefighter at the Cedar Rapids Fire Department, said.

Popelka started working for the department about 20 years ago when she was 42 years old. At the time she started in the department, there were two oth-

er female firefighters who passed along their advice on overcoming adversity in the field.

And overcoming adversity is exactly what Popelka had to do.

Popelka stood shoeless in the kitchen during her rookie year at the station, making cookies for her coworkers during some downtime the firefighters had in between calls. As she was running around and baking cookies, an older male firefighter walked in laughing and made the comment, "Yep, that's where the woman should be: barefoot in the kitchen."

Popelka said although he may not have meant it in a crude way, it has stuck with her during her 20 years in the fire service.

Popelka said the department continues to improve representation and accept women in the field.

In 2017, the department created the Young Women's Fire Academy to in-

troduce women and girls ages 16 and older to the fire service by providing skills and opportunities for participants to learn about firefighting as a career.

Popelka said during the academy a couple of years ago, women were participating in a fitness challenge, and one of the battalion chiefs of the department came down to observe. And as one woman was running through the challenge, the chief was shocked to see every participant cheering the woman on and supporting her through the entire challenge.

"The battalion chief afterward came up and told us, 'It's just amazing to see the difference. Men wouldn't be doing that,'" Popelka said. "It was just neat for him to see how the women encouraged each other."

Finding a support system

Popelka said female

firefighters need to have a solid support system to do a job in a male-oriented field.

Both Popelka and Kunkle said their husbands and children are supportive of their career paths, and they are grateful to have that backing.

"[My husband and children] are my biggest cheerleaders," Kunkle said. "They've always been really proud of me, and that makes it a lot easier when I'd have to leave for 24-hour shifts and not be able to see them, or if I've missed a holiday or birthday or an important event."

Wichmann said she's appreciative of her niece and nephew, who she cares so deeply for, and wants to be a role model for them as she works in the fire service.

"I want them to be able to have the mindset that they can do anything. They can be anything," Wichmann said.

Kunkle said not a lot of young girls think about being firefighters when they grow up because they don't see that female representation often.

"I think it's really important for them to see me and Megan and Julie out there so that maybe [firefighting] is something that will pop into their mind," Kunkle said.

Wichmann said, despite the challenges of being in the fire service, the people she works with and the community she works in make the job worth it.

"The guys and gals that I work with on the daily through my volunteer experience and my professional firefighting experience are the ones that make the job," Wichmann said. "Just cooking dinner together and running these calls together, doing things outside of the job. It's fulfilling, and I wish everybody could experience something like it."

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Grace Smith/The Daily Iowan

Wichmann and other first responders roll a stretcher to an ambulance on a call in Cedar Rapids on Jan. 2. Wichmann said she enjoys being in the fire service and helping community members. "You never know what the day has in store for you," Wichmann said. "So, just being able to kind of roll with the punches or adapt and overcome is kind of the motto for me."



Grace Smith/The Daily Iowan

Wichmann walks out of a Cedar Rapids school after responding to a fire alarm on Jan. 2. As a female firefighter, Wichmann tries to make herself available and approachable for community members of all ages to ask questions, which is what she does at the Young Women's Fire Academy. The academy was started by the CRFD in 2017 and helps provide skills and opportunities for women and girls ages 16 and older to learn about firefighting as a career. Wichmann said she still talks to women who went through the academy.



Contributed.



Grace Smith/The Daily Iowan

An American flag patch is seen on a firefighter's coat at a training tower in Cedar Rapids on Jan. 2.



Grace Smith/The Daily Iowan

Wichmann works out at the gym inside the Cedar Rapids Central Fire Station on Dec. 7, 2022. Wichmann said she tries to work out at least once a day on her shifts but often has to take a break from lifting weights to respond to calls in the community.



Grace Smith/The Daily Iowan

Firefighters Travis Foster, Van Weelden, Wichmann, and McFarlane make nachos for dinner at the Cedar Rapids Central Fire Station on Dec. 7, 2022. Wichmann said the people she works with are what makes the job so special. "The guys and gals that I work with on the daily through my volunteer experience and my professional firefighting experience are the ones that make the job," Wichmann said. "Just cooking dinner together and running these calls together, doing things outside of the job. It's fulfilling, and I wish everybody could experience something like it."



Grace Smith/The Daily Iowan

Wichmann and her coworkers walk around the Cedar Rapids Central Fire Station on Dec. 7, 2022. Shift members didn't receive many calls that day, so the team walked around the station to cure their cabin fever.