



## OYA’s Female Facilities Graduate Second Class of Wildland Firefighters

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Two seconds. That’s how much time Alissa M. had to spare when she finished the last lap of one of the hardest tasks she’d ever attempted: carrying a 45-pound pack for three miles, and doing it in less than 45 minutes.

It’s no easy task for anyone, but particularly for an 18-year-old who only weighs 115 pounds and doesn’t even like running. But for Alissa, the stakes were too high to quit. Finishing the pack test — at the end of a long week of classroom instruction and hands-on work — meant she’d join the second class of wildland firefighting academy graduates from Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility.

When she finished, she fell to the ground, hot and out of breath. And she cried.

“I felt really emotional for some reason. I didn’t expect that,” she says. “I felt really good about myself because I didn’t think I could actually do it.”

“I feel like it’s really an advantage for when I get out of here. People will see I actually did something instead of just sitting in here and doing my time. I actually put myself to work and accomplished things I never would have thought about when I was outside.”

Alissa was one of 14 youth from the Oregon Youth Authority’s Oak Creek facility and the Young Women’s Transition Program (YWTP) who completed the firefighting academy in early May. One Oak Creek staff member, assistant security manager Drew Reynolds, also earned his certification alongside them. The program — taught by staff from the Oregon Youth Authority’s Camp Riverbend firefighting academy — gives the graduates a certification that allows them to fight wildland fires anywhere in the U.S.



*Oak Creek and YWTP’s newest class of wildland firefighting graduates.*



*Youth search for remaining embers to put out during their practice burn.*

It was the second time the Riverbend academy came to OYA’s female facilities — 22 Oak Creek and YWTP youth completed the first program back in November 2016. Nine of those first graduates — including two who already had paroled out of OYA’s facilities — did the program again this May to get re-certified.

Participants had to complete classroom work and pass a written exam. They also had hands-on experience putting out a fire that instructors set on the facility grounds. The youth learned to dig a fire line, lay hose, mop up, and dig in search of hot spots.

The final part was the pack test, mimicking the experience wildland firefighters have when carrying their gear out to fire sites.

Arianna M., 19, says the pack test was the toughest part of the week.

“It was mentally straining,” she says. “If you go into it saying you can’t do it, then you’re not going to be able to pass. You have to be mentally strong to make it happen.”

Arianna is on track to be released in about a month, and she hopes her certification will turn into a job opportunity when she returns to her home in Medford.

“I feel like if I put my mind to anything I want to do, I can do it,” she says. “I think this has changed my opportunities a lot. It puts me at an advantage when I’m looking for a job. And it will help me do more positive things in my life so that I don’t have to come back to Oak Creek.”



*The academy students practiced putting out a fire inside the Oak Creek fence.*



*A youth helps light the practice fire that the students then worked to put out.*



*Instructor Scott Robarge from Camp Riverbend teaches the youth how to feel the ground in search of hot spots after putting out the fire.*