



What do you want to be when you grow up? Montana first-grader already has a fire career mapped out

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First-grader Owen Marquardt can't wait to be a firefighter. Photo courtesy of Kristen Marquardt

First-grader Owen Marquardt already has the rest of his life figured out.

"I'm gonna be a firefighter," he said on a recent visit to the BLM Billings Field Office. "I like the trucks," he added with a toothy grin as he perched inside the cab of Engine 1602, a Type 6 Engine that is fully decked-out with firefighting gear.

To say the 7-year-old from Laurel, Montana, is obsessed with fire management would be an understatement.

"He's awesome! He already knows more about the BLM fire program than I do," Jhen Rawling, a Fire Mitigation and Education Specialist with the Billings Field Office, joked as she prepared to give Owen a tour of Engine 1602 on a sunny, breezy morning in February. This would be his sixth time visiting the field office's fire truck bay since August.

Here's a partial list of the fire-related items which are Owen's favorite possessions: a Pulaski fire tool, a quilt

emblazoned with flames and fire trucks, a Smokey Bear stuffed animal, a backpack covered with forest-fire badges, a miniature truck painted yellow and labeled "Beartooth Fire District" (it's equipped with a replica drip torch and a garden hose), and a full library of books about fire management. Oh, and let's not forget the full-sized Nomex.

"Owen was given a decommissioned Nomex suit, so I took it to the tailor to have it altered for his size," his mother Kristen said. "Now he wears it all the time. I can barely get him to take it off at bedtime."

The youngster's all-consuming interest in forest fires started about three years ago (half a lifetime for Owen) when his parents took him

camping near Red Lodge and he met some Forest Service firefighters who were working nearby. They gave Owen a hands-on tour of their truck and equipment and since then, Owen has been all fired-up about fire, his parents said.

His reason for learning everything he can about the effects of fire and how to manage it are simple: "I like the forest and care about the animals and people, so I want to keep everyone safe."

But what he really loves are the trucks. As Billings Field Office engine captain Leroy Evans lifted him up to work the pump mechanism on the back of Engine 1602, Owen was speechless with excitement.



First-grader Owen Marquardt sits in the cab of Engine 1602, a Type 6 Engine used by the Billings Field Office for fighting wildfires. Owen recently visited the Billings Field Office fire station with his parents and brother during a school holiday. Photo by David Abrams

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“We come up here all the time,” Kristen Marquardt said, “but this is the first time he’s gotten to start the pump on his own. This is a big day for him.”

Owen’s father Parker said he’s proud of his son’s interest, bragging how he took first place in a school-wide competition for a science project which studied the rate at which fire spreads across a hillside.

“We started a fire in our back yard,” Parker said, quickly adding, “A small one—it was very controlled with five-gallon buckets of water close at hand.”

With some help from his parents, Owen had built a miniature forest on a plywood board—complete with moss, trees and rocks—then studied how quickly the flames traveled both up- and downhill.

Owen has also turned into a fire-fighting ambassador of sorts at his school. He recently gave presentations to every first-grade class at West Elementary in Laurel, talking about his science project and responsible fire management.

“I told them the difference between good fire and bad fire,” Owen said. “Not all fire is bad. Good fire can help clean out the forest.”

Billings Field Office engine captain Leroy Evans shows Owen Marquardt how to use a fire hose during the first-grader’s recent visit to the field office’s fire station. Photo by David Abrams



Billings Field Office engine captain Leroy Evans shows Owen Marquardt how to use a fire hose during during the first-grader’s recent visit to the field office’s fire station. Photo by David Abrams



Billings Field Office engine captain Leroy Evans explains the equipment and controls inside the cab of a Type 6 Engine as first-grader Owen Marquardt, decked out in full firefighting gear, takes a tour of the field office’s fire station. Photo by David Abrams



Owen’s backpack. Photo courtesy of Kristen Marquardt.