

The Pulaski Club: Training the Next Generation

Kingsport, TN

By Laurel Kays, Bryan Kerns and Adam Warwick

What Is the Pulaski Club?

Led by math teacher and wildland firefighter Bryan Kerns since 2018, the Dobyns-Bennett High School Pulaski Club offers high school students a unique opportunity to gain real world experience on the fireline. The club is not only training members of the next generation of fire professionals, but encouraging students to believe in themselves and their own worth no matter their future profession.

Students participating in the Pulaski Club take Basic Wildland Firefighter courses (S-130/190/L-180) online through the Wildland Fire Learning Portal. The club meets twice a month after school, with many students also electing to take the Principles of Fire and Emergency Medical Services course that Kerns teaches. Meetings reinforce firefighting concepts through hands-on demonstrations,

including fire ecology experiments on campus in partnership with the school's science department.

But the highlight of the Pulaski Club is getting to participate as a crew member on a prescribed fire. Students over the age of 18 can participate in burns as crew members, while younger students can attend as observers. The club has burned with partners including The Nature Conservancy's Southern Blue Ridge FLN co-lead Adam Warwick, the Tennessee Valley Authority and private contractor Heritage & Habitat. This has included burning to restore native grasslands on the farm in New Castle, Virginia, owned by former Senator Bill Frist and his wife, Tracy, who are active supporters of the club.

How Does It Work?

One of the biggest questions people have about the Pulaski Club is, "How do you deal with liability?" The Dobyns-Bennett High School Pulaski Club was able to secure insurance through its career and technical education program, sometimes called vocational school. Insurance policies for these programs cover areas such as nursing, plumbing and fire science. The policy allows seven students at a time to go out on prescribed fires.

THE POWER OF STORIES

The real power of the Pulaski Club is in the stories of its students. Fourteen alumni are enrolled in educational programs or pursuing careers in natural resource management or emergency response, including one who is a member of the Lone Peak Hotshots in Utah. Meanwhile, 13 current students volunteer with local volunteer fire departments and lifesaving crews. Other club alumni never pursued a wildland fire career, but through the club developed the self-confidence and sense of belonging that enabled them to stay in school and pursue meaningful lives and careers.

Encouraging students to believe in themselves and build meaningful lives regardless of whether that includes fire is at the heart of what the club seeks to achieve. Speaking of a former student who found his place in the club, Bryan Kerns said, "Whether they end up being a PhD forester or a plumber who's raising a good family and being a good dad and husband and a good citizen, it's all about changing and helping the next generation live happy and honorably."



Pulaski Club members gather in front of their on-campus fire ecology experimental plot.
© Bryan Kerns

Crucially, the Pulaski Club is completely free for students. Beyond securing the insurance policy, nearly all the costs for the club are covered by donations. These donations have provided all the personal protective equipment (PPE) students need to participate in burns, including fire-resistant Nomex clothing, boots and even the same fire packs used in the filming of the movie “Only the Brave.”

Club Accomplishments

- The Pulaski Club functions as a prescribed fire module that burned 125 acres on five prescribed burns during the 2020-2021 school year.
- The club has drawn thousands of dollars’ worth of donations of Nomex, hard hats, boots, packs and other equipment.
- Fourteen alumni have enrolled in educational programs or are pursuing careers in natural resource management or emergency response.
- Thirteen current students are volunteering with local volunteer fire departments and lifesaving emergency crews.
- And all students are encouraged to believe in themselves and their potential—and to better understand fire—whether they become wildland firefighters or plumbers, scientists or just more knowledgeable community members and voters.

MORE ONLINE

Pulaski Club website:

<https://sites.google.com/k12k.com/dbhs-pulaski-club/home?authuser=0>

“Bringing Fire Science to High School Students,” *Longleaf Leader* (2022):

<https://tnc.app.box.com/s/g6gugd50wkccvr4dczxy7nez8723iqkm>

“Passing the Torch,” presentation at North Carolina Prescribed Fire Council annual meeting (2021):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzdAgslc-qg>



Pulaski Club members work on a prescribed burn. © Bryan Kerns

Keeping up the Good Work

Bryan Kerns plans to continue building on the Pulaski Club’s success, including:

- Burning with local partners, including Southern Blue Ridge FLN members and the volunteer burn crew he created with the Kingsport Fire Department, which serves as a TNC burn resource; and
- Mentoring students and getting them excited about prescribed fire and fire science: “I always want to encourage people to get young people out in the field. Don’t let the magic age of 18 keep them from inviting young folks out to observe. Even if it’s from the parking lot, getting fire on the ground in front of students can change lives!”

For more about the Pulaski Club, contact:

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The Fire Learning Network is part of the *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together* (PERFACT) cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more about PERFACT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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