

## ALUMNA NAMED

# Fresno's first female fire chief

by Nathan Fuentes

Newly appointed Fresno Fire Chief Kerri Donis — the first woman to hold the position in the 137-year history of the Fresno Fire Department — says her decision to come to Fresno State and play softball was the best choice she ever made.

Across the nation, it's not uncommon to find female fire chiefs, Donis says. "It's just finally found its time in Fresno."

Born and raised in Moline, Ill., Donis was recruited out of high school to play softball at Illinois State under coach Margie Wright. Soon after, Wright took the coaching job at Fresno State, leaving Donis with a sense of dissatisfaction. "I knew I wasn't going to meet any of my personal or career goals athletically [without her] so I sought her out," Donis says.

Donis transferred to Fresno State in 1987 and played softball until 1990.

**"My time at Fresno State was a great experience," says Donis, now 46. "The campus had a very homey feel, a safe, comfortable environment to be in."**

She received her bachelor's degree in exercise science at Fresno State in 1990 and earned the Fresno State Alumni Association's Top Dog Alumna Award on behalf of the department of Athletics in 2008.

The Bulldogs finished as the national runner-up at the Women's College World Series each of Donis' three years on the team. Donis says she owes a lot of her teamwork skills to Wright.

Wright guided the Fresno State softball program to the NCAA Women's College World Series 10 times, including a national championship in 1998. "Her record speaks for itself," Donis says. "She was great at what she did and was a great mentor and an extremely good motivator. She pulled the best out of her players."

The two kept in contact after Donis graduated, and their relationship could not be stronger.

Wright, who retired as Fresno State's coach in 2012 and moved back to Illinois, flew to Fresno to see Donis sworn in as fire chief on Jan. 14. "I'm extremely proud of her," Wright says. "I always knew Kerri would do something special."



*Kerri Donis has spent 18 years in the department, including a stint as deputy fire chief before being named chief in January.*

**Wright says she often told her players, "However good you think you are, you can always be better."**

Donis says the skills she learned in sports helped shape her career, but she had no idea she would gravitate to firefighting.

After college, Donis became a fitness trainer. A client mentioned that she would make a good firefighter because of her attitude. That client was the wife of the deputy chief of the Fresno Fire Department at the time. The encounter piqued Donis' interest in firefighting, as the similarity to team sports was uncanny.

"You have to be a team player, disciplined, mentally tough, physically prepared," Donis says. "It all lined up."

Donis became an entry-level firefighter in 1996 and worked her way up through the ranks.

Gena Strang-Behrens, a former softball teammate and friend of Donis, says Donis is driven and always did what was best for the team. Strang-Behrens, who is a member of the Presidential Transition Team for new Fresno State President Joseph I. Castro, was also present at Donis' swearing-in ceremony.

"I'm just so proud of her and the work she does," Strang-Behrens says. "I am proud to call her my friend."

*— Nathan Fuentes is a community journalism student at Fresno State.*