

Training burn leaves a lasting imprint

By Bob Sklar
staff writer

Within five minutes, a couch fire had spread to the drapery and other living room furniture in a house on Middlebelt May 6.

Ceiling temperatures had risen to 1,200 degrees. Smoke was so thick, visibility was almost nil.

"By then, survivability in that room was minimal," said Deputy Fire Chief Peter Baldwin of the Farmington Hills Fire Department.

It took eight minutes to extinguish the fire, which was limited to the living room.

Firefighters set the fire as part of a training session in the furnished, two-story house, donated by Kinder-Care Learning Centers.

"We tried to re-create a typical accidental fire to give people the opportunity to see the end effect of fire," Baldwin said.

Firefighters let the fire develop for 17 minutes before moving in with the hoses.



Mike Garr
fire education coordinator.

"We thought that would typically be enough time for parents to collect their children, get outside and go to a neighbor's house to call the fire department," said firefighter Michael Garr, fire education coordinator.

THE NEAREST smoke detector, in the kitchen, blared 45 seconds after the couch was torched. By department standards, the fire was small. Only 100 gallons of water were used to extinguish it.

But damage from smoke and heat was extensive throughout the frame house. "Those are the things that kill most fire victims, not flames," Baldwin said.

Duly impressed, 5-year-old Charles Nichol of Farmington Hills said: "It's amazing how much stuff

can be ruined in a fire."

Tommy Rauchhorst, 8, of Detroit said he learned why he should "get out real fast" if his house ever catches fire.

Fire claims 5,000 lives a year in the United States. Most fatalities occur at night, while people are asleep at home.

Farmington Hills firefighters took care to limit flame damage from the couch fire, a simulated electrical fire.

"We wanted to create the experience of a real fire. But we didn't want to affect the house's structural integrity," Baldwin said.

EAST MIDDLE School sixth and seventh graders were among 600 visitors who toured the fire scene May 7-11.

Visitors learned about the power and speed of uncontrolled flames, how smoke travels, how to identify and remove fire hazards, installing and testing smoke detectors, and the need to act quickly in a fire.

Tours played up the importance of having smoke detectors on each level of your house to assure early warning in case of fire.

Visitors were told to plan and practice two quick escape routes and to have a common meeting point outside, away from the house.

They also were told to sleep with the bedroom door closed and why it's wise to have escape ladders stored but handy in each second-floor bedroom.

During the training burn, the bed-

rooms and bathroom where the doors had been left open were blackened. But the bedroom where the door had been kept closed was undamaged. Even youngsters could figure out which room provided the best chance of survival.

THE TOURS marked the first time a Farmington Hills training burn was later opened to the public. Occasionally, firefighters have let neighbors into houses that actually burned after obtaining permission

from the owners.

Even though fires are reported daily in newspapers or on television, few people experience their devastating effects.

"The tours attacked people's senses," Garr said. "They let people see what a fire smells and looks like."

In Garr's view, the tours quickly sold the fire safety message. As he put it: "They didn't glamorize fire. They taught that fire is definitely an enemy to be feared."

She has chance to 'feel' fire

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She was inside the house for much of the time the fire spread. And she now understands why people panic or can't find their way out in a fire.

"The reality of it was very frightening," said Laura Miner, assistant principal at East Middle School, who witnessed the devastating effects of fire.

Dressed in full gear and briefed about what would happen, she watched as the Farmington Hills Fire Department set and fought a simulated electrical fire in an old house across from the school on Middlebelt May 6.

After the training burn, sixth and seventh graders at East joined others in touring the house before it was demolished May 11.

A bit apprehensive about how the students would react, Miner said, "The kids are treating it not at all like a sensationalized experience, but as an extremely important learning experience."

"They're talking about how to get out of a burning house now," she added. "I think they appreciate fire alarms and the damage that can be done in such a short period of time."

THE FRAME house sustained heavy heat and smoke damage even though the fire lasted only 25 minutes.



Fire Chief Richard Marinucci (left) with East assistant principal Laura Miner inside the burned house.

The most beneficial tip she gleaned was to stay low to the ground in a fire because of vast differences in temperature and oxygen, Miner said.

Most students who toured the house were impressed by the need to have and practice two escape routes at home.

The tours are now over. But Miner is still sending the fire safety message: "I find kids stopping me in the hallways, asking me what it felt like

being inside the house when the fire started. Through me, they'll be able to experience what went on for a long time to come."

Miner hopes the training burn program grows so more children can "get the opportunity to learn firsthand about fire and to talk to the fire department to plan for their family's safety at home."

Firefighters plan to open another training site to the public this fall — provided a suitable house becomes available.



photos by PETER BALDWIN

A couch fire caused heavy flame damage to the living room of the old house.

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