

Fireman Frank fights fires with words and wit

By CARL STODDARD

Frank Couttis steps away from the podium and starts jabbing fingers at his young audience.

"What do you do when you house is on fire?" he asks. "You get up and get out the door."

"If the door is hot or warm, don't open it. Go the window and wait until the fire department arrives. But don't wait until you get hurt."

"And don't worry about the pets and Mom and Dad. Watch yourself."

Working around the group at Alex Menovian School in Southfield, he keeps asking questions and dishing out short, no-nonsense answers. A car salesman-turned-fireman, he seems to have found his calling and goes at it with an almost evangelistic zeal.

Couttis, a West Bloomfield resident, began talking to groups about fire safety last year. Since then, he has logged more than 50 speaking engagements and now poses as "Fireman Frank" about once a week.

COUTTIS DOES ALL this without any pay from his employer, the Southfield Fire Department, where he has worked for the past four years. He initiated the idea and continues to seek engagements, he says, to get out the word about saving lives.

"This is important," he tells a visitor while waiting to talk to a group of

100 students at the private Southfield school recently. "It's important to the kids. They ask, 'What do I do in a fire?' I tell them. Maybe it'll help."

A stocky man with a mustache and a quick smile, Couttis began his career as Fireman Frank while giving tours of the Southfield Fire Station and testing in tips on fire safety as he guided people through the station. Because he is also a paramedic with the department's Life Support Unit (LSU), he was able to add a few pointers about first aid and safety.

Now he finds himself talking to students, groups of housewives and business people. But it is in the schools where he often finds the need the greatest to deliver his message.

"I'm surprised how enlightened kids are," he says. "But it's like when I want to school. Three kids in the classroom know all the answers."

But if some students don't know all the answers, they needn't worry. Fireman Frank has the answers to almost every question.

ON STAYING CALM during a fire: "Listen to the adults. But if you're by yourself, listen to yourself."

On smoke detectors: "If you've got a smoke detector in your home, you want to sleep with your door open. You want to hear that BEEEEP."

On what to do if the doorway is blocked by fire or smoke: "Go to a



Fireman Frank launches into his safety talks with an almost evangelistic zeal. For the car salesman who became a fireman, the message is

simple—stay cool and stay alive. "Maybe it'll help," he says of his lectures, which are done on his own time. (Staff photo by Gary Friedman)

window. We take no more than four minutes to get to a fire in Southfield. Wait by the window.

"We got to a fire and someone's father was jumping out the window and breaking both legs on the drive just as we drove up. True story."

On getting through a house filled with smoke: "Smoke-filled room. Down on the floor. That's where the freshest air is. Smoke doesn't seem to get down on the floor. Don't ask me why."

On methods of escaping a fire: "You're supposed to have a ladder by the window. How many houses have ladders by the window? That's the dream world approach. If you did that, part of my job would be gone—saving people. I'd just be squirting water."

On first aid: "How do we stop bleeding? Pressure. But don't be afraid of blood. You're not going to be any good if you come up to a guy and he's bleeding and you go 'Oh no'."

On dealing with limbs that have been severed: "Amputations. I hope you never see one. If you do, find the piece. Put it on ice."

ON DRUGS AND related problems: "I don't want to dwell on drugs. I'm not a cop. You're old enough, think for yourself. But I wish I could show you how bad a drug overdose looks."

On determining if a bone is broken: "If your arms at an angle, or if it's swollen, it's broken."

On babysitting and fire safety: "You're at somebody else's house. You have to know how to get you and that kid out of the house."

On other subjects. Answering the phone while babysitting: "If someone calls and you say you're the babysitter, you just invited someone to the house. Never say you're alone or that you'll be alone all night. And always know where the parents will be."

Civic Theatre does musical

The powerful musical "Man of La Mancha" will close the season for the Southfield Civic Theatre.

An adaptation of the legendary Don Quixote epic, the show focuses first on its author Miguel de Cervantes as he is imprisoned by the Spanish Inquisition for trying to collect taxes from a church. Cervantes bargains for his life in prison and takes the prisoners on a voyage through his life as a weebone knight.

Val Sisto, a veteran of 30 years in theater, including Broadway, plays the dual role of Cervantes and Don Quixote. Jacqueline Turri Bacus, an experienced actress plays the saltery kitchen wench, Aldonza, and the faithful servant Sancho is played by Dean Nelson.

Quixote's nemesis, Sanson Carrasco is played by Lisa Helen Senal, the housekeeper is Annette Henion and Nick Young is the padre. The innkeeper and his wife are played by William Davenport and Jeanne Johannes.

The play will run from May 18-21 with 8 p.m. performances at the Southfield Civic Center.

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Students listed to honor roll

A total of 571 students at Michigan State University achieved a 4.0 or straight A average during the winter term, including several Southfield residents.

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