

Abbottville

Where terrible things happen so emergency crews can practice

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A tornado cut a devastating swath through Farmington Hills Tuesday, leaving the city without power and forcing Mayor Nancy Bates to declare a dusk-to-dawn curfew.

Wondering how you missed it? The tragedy really happened in Abbottville, a tabletop diorama designed to train firefighters, police officers, emergency response teams, government workers and officials to respond when disaster strikes. Abbottville's owners, Don and Bev Abbott, used the city for three days of training at the Costick Center in Farmington Hills early this week.

"I've worked in a number of cities, and this was the best I've seen," said Tori Arbenowske, assistant to Hills City Manager Steve Brock. "It refreshed and sharpened our emergency response as a city."

Hills Deputy Fire Chief Pete

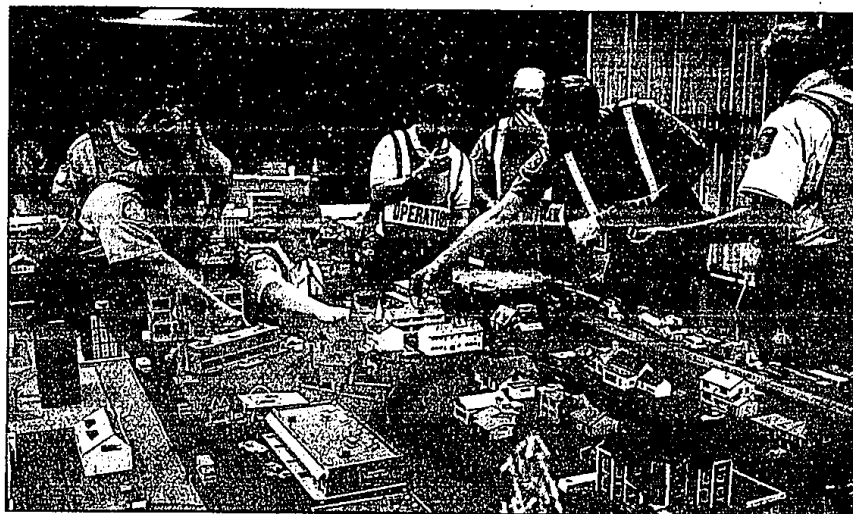
Baldwin, who set up the training, said the scenarios included fires, natural disasters and bad accidents. Each situation was real, taken from Don's experiences training his own and other departments.

"This is a good way of teaching lessons," Baldwin said. "It's a visual, which is great."

A spellbinding story teller, Don uses real-life scenarios to get his points across. On Wednesday afternoon, he talked with a group of western Wayne County firefighters about an incident in which bleachers collapsed during a high school football game.

As he detailed the actual response, Don also talked about what others participating in an Abbottville recreation activity had suggested. Emergency workers tend to listen a little closer, Baldwin said, because they know Abbott is credible.

He's been there. A retired Division Chief for Warren Township Fire Department in Marion County, Ind.,



Bird's eye view: Farmington Hills firefighters plan their response to a disaster in make-believe Abbottville.

STAFF PHOTOS BY BILL BREKLER

Don was named 1992 Innovator of the Year by the International Society of Fire Service Instructors. He holds an associate degree in fire sciences, and since his retirement has traveled around the country with his wife acting as a consultant in emergency responder safety and incident management.

"That's about one-fifth of it," Bev said, pointing to five large tables set up in the Shannon Room at the Costick Center. "It's just stored in a very large shed we have in the back of the house."

In addition, the Abbots have several trailers full of equipment stored in other states, so they can just fly in without having to transport everything. After Farmington Hills, the couple flew to Arizona. Baldwin tried to book them for a second session, but the couple didn't have an opening until September - of next year.

Bev said the response they've gotten from the communities

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Don Abbott
—disaster trainer

they've visited has been "wonderful." She believes people respond positively because the simulation gets them both emotionally and physically involved.

While some of the firefighters who attended Wednesday might have been a little hesitant about the role-playing at first, Baldwin said they quickly got into the scene. Afterward, they talked about their actions with Don,

even pointing out what they might do differently if they had to do it over again.

"They'll tell you the mistakes they made," Don said. "They'll remember that for at least the next six months to a year."

On Tuesday, Arbenowske's role was to deal with the media after the simulated tornado.

"Don was great," she said. "He had a microphone and a big camera light that he was shining in my face."

Dealing with his tough, rapid-fire questions was a far cry from most of the simulations Arbenowske has attended. Most of those have involved sitting around a command post, discussing what the response might be to a disaster.

"It's not as real as this. We actually had to play act it out," she said. "I even wrote press releases."

The \$1,000-a-day cost of the disaster simulation hasn't dampened Abbottville's popularity. Don and Bev travel 42 weeks out

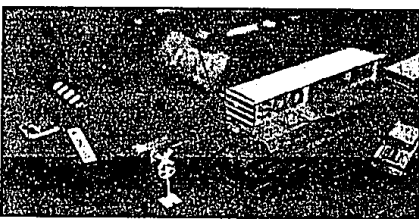
of the year, and most of their engagements come through "word of mouth" advertising.

In almost every community, they see the same kinds of issues raised, and as Don said, "Things like this could happen in almost any community."

The one trend he sees more than any other in the world of emergency response is a complacency among citizens whose fire and police departments and rescue services are doing a good job. In too many cases, he said, people don't want to invest in additional staffing or equipment because they don't see a real pressing need.

And then the bleachers collapse. Or a tornado hits.

"Emergency response crews need to grow with a city," Don said. "We just haven't figured out yet that when one grows, the other has to also grow toward having enough people to do the job."



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