

Kids ‘uplifted’ by visit from local firefighters

Written by By Naomi Mercedes Chan Sun Correspondent
Friday, 17 March 2017 07:51



Even after pulling an all-nighter until 6 am putting out a three story, abandoned school fire in Tohatchi, Firefighters from McKinley West Volunteer Fire Department, District 7 arrived at 8:30 am, to Uplift Community School March 9.

Lt. Darlene Chiquito, Building Manager Alton Yazzie, and Firefighter Tarik Hooper, joined their Fire Chief Rudy Nez to assist in the extensive demonstration and talk.

To the 62 grade schoolers it was nothing but fun, as the room was punctuated by loud screams of delight during the hour long demonstration. The latest firefighting equipment was worn and shown in operation to the fascination of all.

Yazzie put on his firefighting gear in under 60 seconds. Chief Nez set the timer and the kids eagerly decided to chime in with a spontaneous countdown of their own. They appeared shocked when he had finished at 45 seconds. The countdown trailed off and they stared at the tall helmeted firefighter with eyes wide and mouths agape.

“Now we’re going to have one of your teachers try. Which one do you want?” asked Nez.

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Several teachers hurriedly ducked out of the room at this point. After the children peered around for a few seconds, several shouts of “Her! Her!” united in unison at first grade teacher Honey Chavez, who immediately performed a face palm. “Good choice!” Nez said.

Chavez rose like a good sport and managed to don the outfit in just under 60 seconds, which seemed to meet with the approval of the tiny mob.

Nez cracked jokes to his energetic but riveted audience to keep their attention, and then provided clear, concise and practical knowledge they could use at home.

“Does your mother or father, or grandpa or grandma have one of these at home?” he asked. The kids nodded in unison at the large bottle of powdered creamer he held aloft. “This is what we call a dry cow,” he quipped.

The kids giggled. He sprinkled some of the creamer over a lighter and flames shot up. The kids shrieked with laughter. “Don’t DO that!” – a worried teacher warned immediately, and pointedly, at a group of boys near her.

“If you see something like this near the stove, warn somebody that it’s not OK. It can start a fire,” Nez said.

He held up a lighter.

“If this is on a microwave, it can start a fire. Don’t ever touch a lighter or matches, but warn somebody, tell your grandma or auntie, somebody, that it isn’t safe. Tell them Chief Nez told you it wasn’t safe.”

After covering the other basics of dealing with a fire, in clear, simple terms, the Nez and other

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firefighters lead the kids outside, to two shiny white fire trucks. He explained how the vehicles were operated and what the department would do when lightning struck a tree out in the field or if a house caught on fire.

“Water is water ... if there is no fire hydrant, we can suck up and transport water to the fire with this truck from a ditch, a lake (or) anywhere.” Nez said.

The kids jumped up and down in excitement as the firefighters hooked up the hose to the hydrant, while Nez explained safety procedure to the kids. Lining up single file, each of the 62 tiny students, one by one, had a chance to spray the powerful fire hose into the air with assistance from the chief.

Parents and educators had a chance to speak with Nez and shake his hand after the first group returned to class. “You were fighting a fire all day and all night until 6 am and still found time to come out here?” a visitor asked him. He grinned and said “If it’s for the kids, yeah.”

Chiquito commented that after staying for the last group of schoolchildren that afternoon, they would be heading back out to Tohatchi to make sure the school fire was completely out.

UPLIFT GOING UNDER

Uplift is closing down at the end of the school year, a decision made by the state. Uplift’s director, Aleks Mohica, a former U.S. Navy officer, touched on the closing of the school.

“We plan on going out with a bang, to give the kids some good memories to look back on.”

She discussed plans for the rest of the school year, including visits from various educators and professionals. A professor from the University of New Mexico who wishes to remain anonymous is visiting the school, as well as the deputy director of Nasa on the April 4.

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"We're still running full speed ahead, we're not slowing down at all, and we might even have an astronaut visit us in April along with the deputy director, who knows."

By Naomi Mercedes Chan

Sun Correspondent