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Kerry L. Beckford

Enfield Firefighters Come to the Rescue

Jack Flanagan, chief and fire marshal of the Hazardville Fire Department and Don Ellis, a captain in the Enfield Fire Department are quintessential firefighters: dedicated, professional, and ready to respond to any fire crisis. Not many people would associate firefighters with the joyful faces of kindergarteners. But this is Enfield, where small town warmth leads to community involvement. To those who know Jack and Don, it's no surprise that they and their fellow firefighters are part of a successful effort, initiated through William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund by Discovery grant dollars to promote early childhood education.

Enfield's firefighters have been a part of public school kindergarten registration since 2005. "All Aboard for Kindergarten" allowed parents to register their children for kindergarten while entering their child's name for a chance to win a ride on a fire truck to the first day of school.

Michael Beaudry, age 5, was one of those lucky children. His mother, Sheila Beaudry, proudly displays pictures of Michael on the fire truck, wearing what Michael calls his "fireman raincoat." Just ask Michael and he'll tell you: "I got to go on a free ride to school."

But the firefighters of Enfield wanted to take this further.

"We had been looking for opportunities to become more involved with the school system and were looking for avenues and contexts to do that," said Don.

Enter Karen Weselisa, co-chair of the Enfield School Readiness Council and Discovery Enfield/Key Initiatives to Early Education (KITE). Karen's son loves fire trucks and wanted to go to the fire station as often as he could. Could kindergarten registration be combined with a tour of a fire station? It was an idea that Enfield's firefighters embraced.

Parents were and are still welcome to register their children directly at the Enfield Board of Education or even at special registration events. But the firefighters didn't want any child to miss out on the fun. While parents complete the requisite registration



Michael Beaudry, Age 5

paperwork and a brief Discovery survey, their children get a coloring book and a ticket shaped like a fire truck that allows them to tour any Enfield firehouse with a parent or guardian. After their firehouse tour, the children receive a tee-shirt that says "I'm Going to Kindergarten and the Fire Fighters are Proud of Me". Nearly 500 students register each year.

Jack says that most kids love the experience of seeing a fire truck up close. The tours are a simple example of community involvement in early care and education.

The partnership between Enfield firefighters, Discovery Enfield/KITE, and the Enfield Board of Education is a remarkable model of attaining goals by merging seemingly disparate segments of a community. So why are two fire fighting veterans working with early childhood initiatives?

Hazardville's Chief Flanagan is not given to accepting accolades. In that way he is very much like his colleague, Captain Ellis of the Enfield Fire Dept. Both would rather continue doing what they can for the youngest residents of Enfield.

Karen notes that before the firefighters became involved, kindergarten registration was traditional. Parents filled out the forms

"The tours are a simple example of community involvement in early care and education." — Jack Flanagan, Chief and Fire Marshal, Hazardville Fire Department

and it wasn't necessary to include children in this ritual. Yet kindergarten registration is, in fact, an important step in a child's education. Discovery grants funded the first three years of the kindergarten registration program with the intent of openly engaging children and their parents in this milestone. Now in its fourth year, the program continues beyond Discovery's initial role with the firefighters taking the lead.

"They stepped up when we needed stakeholders," Karen said. "They've been the heroes in all of this."

The one challenge to this collaboration had a positive outcome. Private school officials in Enfield were awed by the success of the public school kindergarten registration. They wanted their students to have a chance to get to know Enfield firefighters, too. As they do every day, the firefighters quickly responded by purchasing tee-shirts. Now all of Enfield's families—whether their children will attend private or public school—can come to registration sponsored by the firefighters.

Jack, Don, and their colleagues hoped their presence in Enfield would continue to evolve. And it certainly has. Enfield firefighters are now caretakers of the Book Buddies early education literacy program.

The first Book Buddies program was designed and implemented by two Enfield volunteers, Deb and Scott Giddings, who wanted kindergartners to know the pleasure of owning their very own book. People in Enfield were asked to drop off books to firehouses across Enfield. Despite the program's success, Deb and Scott Giddings were unable to expand the program beyond two of Enfield's elementary schools.

Once, again, it was the firefighters to the rescue.

The Book Buddies program now provides two new books a year to each kindergarten student at six of Enfield's elementary schools. Firefighters solicit monetary donations to purchase the books, which are ordered at a discount through the Enfield Public Library. Teachers select books that are appropriate to the subject matter being studied. Every child in that teacher's class receives the same book. And firefighters personally deliver the books to the classrooms.

This is especially pleasing for Jack. Helping children, he says, "is an extension of what we do now. I like seeing kids enjoy reading."

Most agree that Enfield's fire fighters' skills are numerous. However, wrapping books is not one of them. The collaboration expanded when senior citizens from the Enfield Senior Center volunteered to wrap each book.

Amy Witbro, of the Enfield Public Schools "Partners in Education," and a Discovery coordinator wanted to include senior citizens in an early childhood initiative. Firefighters were already doing senior outreach programs at the senior center.

Now, Senior Center Director, Susan Lather, asks for seniors who would be willing to wrap the books. The response is typically overwhelming and eventually fills the senior center dining room with volunteers to wrap books.



Book Buddies from the Enfield Senior Center wrap books.

Like the kindergarten registration, the Book Buddies program has brought a sense of community spirit to Enfield. And it shows that great ideas become reality when the right partners come together. "People want to help but might not know how," said Karen. "Discovery had an idea that is now a great collaboration. The next steps are to continue and expand this initiative."

"There are infinite possibilities for getting involved," said Amy. She challenges other communities to "find the champions within your community."

Jack Flanagan and Don Ellis both feel strongly that children need to feel connected to their communities. It's clear that these firefighters understand the quality of their commitment to Enfield but insist that there are many ways to contribute. "There are a lot of people in Enfield who are involved and who care," said Don. "It's about encouraging kids to become part of a larger world in a community that they can grow and thrive in." ■

