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Sant  
Fire Department

# FIRE ACADEMY

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Intense training gives firefighters  
a smoky taste of the real thing

By Karen Pankowski

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

They descend a staircase backward through heat reaching 1,100 degrees while hauling a heavy hose. They crawl along the floor and drag out a 128-pound mannequin that feels as heavy as a beached whale.

A hot day only gets hotter for firefighters who train at the Central Florida Fire Academy in Orlando. But if they are going to learn a new technique or practice an old one, now is the time to do it.

"When the engine company responds to your house, you would like them to have practiced their skills," said William Miles, coordinator at the academy at Mid-Florida Technical Institute. "You don't even want them to have to think about what they're doing."

Formed in 1977, the academy has one of only a few firefighting practice buildings in the area and probably the biggest. The \$1.1 million, three-story building opened in March 1991.

Built with removable walls, the building allows training instructors to simulate a blaze in a convenience store, a living room or a third-floor apartment. All it takes is igniting a little straw in a cardboard box and the fire travels up the brick wall as it would in an uncontrolled situation.

The Winter Park Fire Department is one of 15 departments that pay a fee for their firefighters

to hone their skills at the academy's burn building and other structures. The fee is based on the number of certified firefighters in the department.

Winter Park Fire Chief Dennis Sargent stressed the importance of training, especially since firefighters may work for months without being called to a serious fire.

"This is to build their confidence in the equipment and to sharpen their ability to perform the techniques they need to," Sargent said. Departments also need

to keep up-to-date with new developments in firefighting, he said, adding that techniques have changed over the last 20 years.

"The fire service is not what it used to be," Sargent said. "We used to say, 'Well, we'll just risk our lives and that's just

part of the job.' That killed a lot of firefighters."

Today, firefighters have better protective gear and equipment such as helmets made out of a fiberglass composite instead of leather, which weakens in heat and water, Sargent said.

Some departments don't want to change, and in doing so are jeopardizing their employees, Sargent said. For example, firefighters in some cities resist wearing their breathing equipment when they enter smoke-filled buildings, he said.

"It's absolute stupidity is what it is," Sargent said.

Miles said the biggest change

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When the engine company responds to your house, you would like them to have practiced their skills.

— William Miles

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he has seen in the profession is that firefighters now are expected to deal with a variety of hazardous waste and chemicals.

"Twenty-five years ago, people never even thought about it," he said, adding that the influx of plastic materials in today's homes can create new and deadly gases — which make the breathing apparatus all the more necessary.

At the fire academy, Miles oversees a \$1 million budget and complex that also includes a four-story training tower for rappelling and ladder work and a propane gas area used to simulate car and tank fires. In addition, a building with a built-in maze helps firefighters get used to wearing their breathing equipment while crawling past obstacles.

Winter Park firefighters recently used the burn building to practice three scenarios, including a search and rescue effort in a basement fire and climbing a ladder to the second story during several fires.

Winter Park's department training officer Louis Salado said the goal in practicing is to get firefighters ready to fight fires as quickly, safely and efficiently as possible while using a minimal amount of water, which can cause additional damage to a home or business.



GEORGE SKENE/SENTINEL

Trainer John Donahue instructs firefighters about techniques they will use during a practice session at the fire academy.

Training, scheduled quarterly, is important because it ensures that "any problems we may encounter can be corrected safely right then and there," Salado said.

Firefighters practicing at the academy, including a 23-year-old newly hired female firefighter and a fire lieutenant, agreed.

"It reinforced what I'd learned," said firefighter/paramedic trainee Anjela Johnston. She said her co-workers showed her how to hold the hose against her body for better control. The hose packs 20 pounds of water pressure at the

nozzle and pumps 150 gallons of water a minute. "They showed me tricks that you don't learn in school."

"It was hot," a flushed Fire Inspector Lt. Lyn Wright said after an exercise. She said she learned a new technique for attacking the fire — a method she didn't get in school 10 years ago.

Sargent, who was hired by Winter Park last month, said he was pleased with the way firefighters handled the exercises.

"You people made me real proud, all of you," he told the group.





GEORGE SKENE/SENTINEL

If it crackles like fire, it calls for the Winter Park Fire Department — but this time it's only a drill.