

Fire Chief Stewart McMillan.



Firefighters extinguish a vehicle fire.



Outside the MAAC.

The MAAC Public Safety Training Campus

By Cheryl Wooten

Where there's smoke, there's fire. And at the brand new MAAC Public Safety Training Campus in Valparaiso, there's plenty of both.

Tucked away on the east side of town, the MAAC (Multi Agency Academic Cooperative) opened its doors on September 16th, a state-of-the-art, 4 ½ acre training facility for firefighters, police officers, EMS and hazmat. The campus includes a 90-seat classroom space and several buildings that, in a controlled manner, can be ignited or filled with smoke to simulate the environments that first responders experience in the line of duty. According to Celina Weatherwax, President, McMillan Family Foundation, "We have created a unique model that increases efficiencies and supports collaboration amongst the public safety community. We've not yet identified any other private/public training facility, coordinated similarly to the MAAC, anywhere in the country."

Inspiration for the MAAC, stems from Stewart McMillan,

MAAC's Fire Chief, chairman and CEO of Task Force Tips and who, since the age of 14 has been involved in firefighting. Named in honor of Stewart's father, Clyde "Mac" McMillan, the MAAC was Stewart's way of honoring his father's amazing career in the fire service.

Attached to the classrooms and offices, the large, indoor

bay area is used to teach how to raise, position and lower ladders. It also has a bail-out window with cushioned landing systems for instruction on how to safely jump out of windows.

Disorientation on scene is a major concern for firefighters. The two-story tower simulates an open concept home and when filled with smoke, trainees learn what to do and how to call out.

The multifunctional, red, four-story tower simulates an apartment complex. It's popular with law enforcement for active shooter training and with firefighters as they practice running hose up and down the stairs, around corners and through doors. Inside the blue live burn unit, stove and bed props are ignited then responders train on how to properly extinguish the fire. The propane prop field allows instructors to initiate controlled fires to a dumpster, metal Christmas tree and vehicle because each type of fire behaves differently.

Larger communities like Valparaiso have hydrant systems, but smaller or rural communities sometimes use lakes or ponds for firefighting. The concrete, water-filled pond simulates drawing water from non-hydrant sources. At the vehicle extrication area, responders simulate removing victims from crashed vehicles using rescue tools.

Ward Barnett, the Academy Director, believes that, "a training center is never complete and should always be in a state of construction or improvement to meet the ever-changing demands of first responders."

Before the MAAC, firefighters went from station to station in different communities to train with whatever equipment each station had. Now, by collaborating and pooling their equipment, they have access to collective resources and expert training. During a recent event, more than 100 first responders simultaneously trained at the MAAC.

"First responders have new, increased training requirements imposed by national and state entities, but the challenge is finding funding to pay for it," says Stewart. "Here at the MAAC, we understand how valuable the career and volunteer fire departments and other first responders are and so we're here for them. When you dial 911, they show

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Firefighters training at the MAAC.

up fast. We want to make sure they get the training they need and keep them safe as they serve our communities.”

“The community has been very supportive but more work needs to be done for the long-term sustainability of this training campus,” says Celina. “We are proactively pursuing funding opportunities and engaging members of the communities we serve. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, all donations made to the MAAC are tax deductible. For interested donors, through December, every dollar donated will be matched up to \$100,000.”

So far, this year, the campus has trained teams from numerous fire departments and law enforcement including SWAT teams, canine units and bomb squads. The MAAC serves Porter, Lake, LaPorte, Newton and Jasper counties, but is open to all first responders from Indiana and elsewhere. They also offer public and private tours of the campus.

When first responders have access to the training they need, it directly impacts the communities they serve. Valparaiso is fortunate to have such an amazing resource for its emergency services professionals.

For more information on the MAAC, visit their website at www.maacfoundation.com or call 219-510-9111.



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