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SEPTEMBER 2017

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In makeup and costume, Weatherford firefighters spread laughter with fire-safety tips

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ON THE COVER



Clowning around makes serious subjects fun.

Photo by Kenzie Luke.

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TAKE THE STAGE

— By Amber D. Browne



A child's laugh can be contagious. It can inspire even the most serious adult to embrace a silly side, even if just for a moment. Since 2011, a handful of local first responders have embraced their inner child to educate Weatherford youth about a serious subject — fire safety. Weatherford firefighters don costumes and makeup to perform on stage at local elementary schools as part of the department's Fire Safety Clown program. "It takes a fun approach to education," stated Bob Hopkins, Weatherford Fire Department division chief and fire marshal, who oversees the program.

Although the Weatherford Fire Department was over a decade behind in adopting the Fire Safety Clown program, which began in the U.S. about 20 years ago, the firefighters enthusiastically accepted their roles to entertain and educate about 3,200 students each year. The popularity of fire prevention programs increased in 1972 following a report about the high number of fire-related deaths. Before Bob became fire marshal, the Weatherford Fire Department presented a game show-inspired fire safety program to elementary students. At the time, Bob served as fire inspector under then-fire marshal Kurt Harris. Bob noticed the popularity of the Fire Safety Clown program, and upon his promotion in 2009, he decided to take the program in a different direction.

Firefighter Mike Rudd discussed the success of the Mineral Wells clown program with Bob, and the idea took off in Weatherford. Mike, aka "Spanner," has been with Weatherford's Fire



"It takes a fun approach to education."

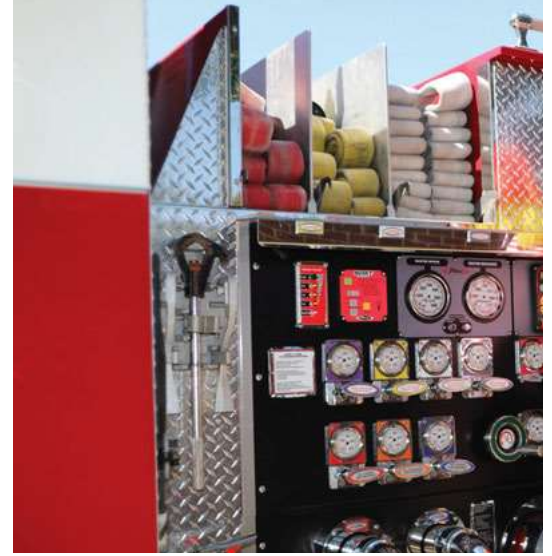


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Safety Clown program since its inception. He is the lead clown and recruits other firefighters to perform. Gene Smithwick, the fire department chaplain, aka "Chappy," was also instrumental in bringing the program to fruition.

Weatherford's program has been successful. "When you're dealing with children, the attention span is very important. When you're trying to teach them life safety skills, things they're going to need for their rest of their lives, you're trying to present that in a funny way. Number one — they can enjoy it. Number two — they can recall it," Bob said.

Each October, the firefighters travel to Weatherford ISD elementary schools and two Christian schools, performing a skit for students in kindergarten through third grade. They also perform for the community during the October Movies in the Park event at the Heritage Park Amphitheater. The skit is performed by a circuit of other area fire departments, including Willow Park. The fire departments share props and stage settings. The Weatherford Fire Department has its own sound system, and two of the performers create the sound effects for the local program. Bob has only performed with the group one year, and it was because of his love for all things pirate. The group plans to perform the pirate skit again this year because of the popularity of the most recent motion picture release in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. "When you can tie it in to something that's popular with kids, it goes a long way," Bob explained.

In most skits, the firefighters dress in firefighting gear but resemble the bull-fighting rodeo clowns rather than circus clowns. Their message isn't always fire-related. "One year, part of our skit




was about bullying.” The group has focused on fireworks safety. They also share several tips including that every family should have a safe place designated in the front yard. “If you have a fire, this is where the family meets. If you have an emergency in the house, this is the one place that they will all meet. If we get separated, we meet right here,” Bob explained. “We educate the children, and the children educate the parents. That’s the whole idea.”

The importance of smoke alarms is always presented in the skits. “Kids will go home and hound their parents.” On a couple of reported incidents, the clowns’ message saved lives. In one case, a sick mother stayed home while her family was out of town for Thanksgiving. The family’s dog woke up the mother after hearing the smoke alarm, and she escaped. “Their third grade daughter would not leave them alone until they got the smoke alarm fixed,” Bob shared.

The clown performance is just one step in the fire prevention program. Each student at the elementary schools receives a coloring book with fire safety tips. The books are donated by the generosity of local businesses within the community throughout the year. Without the donations, a fire prevention grant from Wal-Mart and the generosity of the performing firefighters, the Fire Safety Clown program would not be possible. The firefighters are paid overtime to perform, but they don’t get paid for weeks of practice and often provide their own costumes and makeup.

The clown performance is usually 20-minutes long and begins with loud music and dancing to get the students excited. “We enjoy it. The kids enjoy it, and they get a lot out of it,” Bob said.



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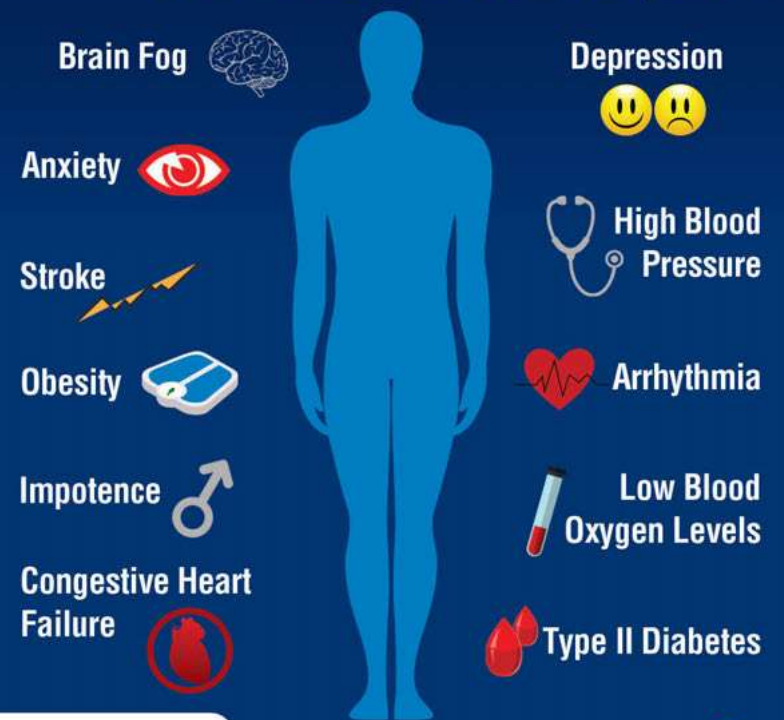
Because of state mandates, Bob said it is getting more difficult each year for the Weatherford Fire Department to perform at area schools. The program was cancelled at Weatherford ISD schools last year because of the scary clown hysteria. The schools tried to reschedule, but October is the only month on the calendar when firefighters have the opportunity to perform due to training. Although clowns may be scary to some, it hasn't been much of a problem for the firefighters during the elementary school performances. When Bob was in second grade, he had his own "scary clown" experience and understands the fear. As he and his siblings enjoyed the rodeo parade in 1967, a clown jumped off the fire truck and headed directly toward his family. "I freaked out and started running to the house," Bob confessed. "I turned around, and they had already gone. But in my brain, that clown was right behind me. I was one of those kids who couldn't cotton to clowns. We understand that." If a student is uncomfortable, they watch from a distance. Most of them eventually warm up to the clowns as they see other students having fun.


Each performing firefighter attends clown school to learn the perspective of clowning, and each takes on his own fire-related persona. Each clown has a different personality ranging from the serious clown to the clowning around clown. During the performances, they only answer to their clown names such as Hozer, Squirt and Chappy. "I think the guys like dressing up. You put people in makeup, and their personality changes," Bob shared. "They all have a sense of humor." Sparky the Fire Dog also makes an appearance at the performances. "When we get to mingle with those children for those days, I love every minute of it," Bob said. "The kids bring a lot of joy to the guys." **NOW**


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