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### Firefighters, staff benefit from the fire training exercises at assisted living center

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JENNIFER BRANNOCK, [jabrannock@naplesnews.com](mailto:jabbrannock@naplesnews.com)

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As alarms screeched in deafening tones and thick, white smoke billowed through the second-floor hallway of the Terracina Grand Senior Living Center on Wednesday night, staffing coordinator Eileen Randall laid flat on her back beneath a cushioned bench.

Even as the power was cut and the place plunged into pitchblackness, illuminated only by incessant strobe lights that flashed from randomly placed signals, easy-listening tunes drifted soothingly to Randall's ears between alarm blasts while she waited.

After several minutes of listening intently for voices or commotion had passed, there was a ruckus at the other end of the hall, about 30 yards from Randall's resting place. Screams rang through the corridor, now so thick with smoke and darkness that she couldn't see her hand in front of her face.

"Harry, your fire is advancing!" came shouts from down the hall. "Harry, you're too high for this fire! You can't stand up that high in this fire!"

Randall could hear groans and the unmistakable sounds of people being dragged down the walkway and down the stairs to safety.

Still, she waited.

"They'll probably come down here next," she said.

But as the clatter in the hallway went from quiet to silent, and the alarms overhead had ceased, Randall used a flashlight to check her watch. Forty-five minutes had passed, and she went ahead and made her own pronouncement:

"I'm dead."

Playing the role

The four volunteer "victims" chatted gaily as they were made up in their costumes and prepared for their acting debuts. The employees from Terracina Grand said they were more than happy to help the East Naples Fire Department with their annual training exercises, and gladly accepted their featured roles in the drama set to unfold that evening.

The "victims" were painted expertly to appear that they had excruciating burn injuries from the simulated fire that was about to rage through the assisted living/senior living, four-story building.

"I'm going to try to make this as realistic as possible," said Bob Mountney, a painter at Terracina Grand. "I'd imagine it's going to be a bit tense when doors are slamming and whistles are blowing and stuff."

Mike Maynor, director of maintenance at the facility, began blowing large amounts of non-toxic smoke down the long hallway as volunteers joked about the characters they were to play. Two of the "victims" were to wander around aimlessly, calling for help, while two others were to lie on the floor, passed out from smoke inhalation.

Everyone fanned out into different locations down the hallway, bracing themselves as the smoke began to drift toward the ceiling, signaling the alarms to sound.

Terracina Grand nurses and aides quickly flooded the hallways once the blaring signals roared to life, escorting elderly patients, who were in on the drill, from their rooms to safety outside.

"It's a very assuring feeling to know that our own staff knows what to do, as well as the fire department," said resident Frederick Wahl, 89.

"I feel like the people taking care of us know what their duties are," added Wahl's wife, Meta, 86. "I felt very secure."

Simultaneously down the road, a team of East Naples firefighters was springing to action, responding to the alarm call from Terracina Grand that was dispatched from real 911 operators.

#### 'Nightmares'

When firefighters arrived at the scene, they were greeted by a large projection screen with a picture of the flaming building simulating what the smoking facility before them was supposed to look like. Firefighters wasted no time raising their ladder to the roof and finding an entrance to the "burning" building.

They clambered down the stairs from the fourth floor to the second, where, they had been notified, victims were trapped. Bringing with them a large hose, firefighters pretended to fight the fire as they searched for signs of life on the dark, smoke-filled floor.

As they discovered their first victims, wearing torn, burnt T-shirts and covered from head to toe with painted-on burns, Lt. Harry Zafiris began improvising.

"I was standing next to Harry shouting about what the fire was doing, because, since it's a simulation, he can't feel the fire for himself," Deputy Chief Doug Dyer said. "Harry is going to have nightmares about this, and it's going to get into his mind as something real."

As Zafiris and two other firefighters assessed the scene, they came across three of the volunteer victims and a couple of practice dummies. One of the dummies was pronounced dead by rescuers, and the trio went on to drag three of the victims to safety as the "fire" advanced upon them.

When they emerged, they were greeted by Collier County Emergency Management Service workers and sheriff's deputies, who helped treat and load victims for transport to the hospital.

"There is no teacher like experience," Capt. Keith Teague said. "They are better prepared to deal with an emergency, and from that standpoint, I think this was a tremendous success."

Oops?

"Help!" Randall called out to no one.

Realizing she'd been left behind, Randall rose to her feet and journeyed down the elevator to the lobby where firefighters were removing their gear and packing up equipment.

"You left me to die," she said, tapping one of them on the shoulder.

Teague acknowledged the oversight, not as a flaw with the drill or his firefighters, but as a sad reality.

"The real world that we're in right now is that if we had a situation like that going on, we can't staff the fire department to the degree where we could handle a 'doomsday event' like this," he said. "We actually put way more elements up there than could possibly have been addressed.

"Generally, we wouldn't see a fire of this size here anyway, because of all the advance alert systems and sprinklers they have."

So why have the worst-case scenario drill?

"The point is to show us where we need work, and it definitely showed us that one crew going into a fire (like this) was not enough," said Zafiris, who has worked for the department for 14 years. "If we see what we did, and learn from mistakes, we can do better to get more people out."

Teague and Dyer agreed that one of the biggest issues noted in the drill was that communication was lacking.

"We would tell them, in a fire like this, to call for more resources early and often," Teague said. "You can't put enough resources on an event this size."

The department got more practice Thursday night and will continue practicing tonight, when they complete the series of drills at the facility.

As for the Terracina Grand staff, Executive Director Cheryl Veech said more communication would be expected among staff members to keep the residents of the 142-room facility clustered and calm. During the drill, one resident was not accounted for, and staff members spent about five frantic minutes tracking her down.

"I'd imagine that in a real situation there would be a need for a lot of communication, but I think that's part of the drill," she said.

"We need to know what the weaknesses are so we can fix them."



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