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Poway students study how to 'be prepared'

FEMA visits elementary school

By: SHAYNA CHABNER - Staff Writer

POWAY -- Just seconds after hearing cries of "Kaori, your shirt's on fire!" from her peers Wednesday, the Painted Rock Elementary School fourth-grader dropped to the ground, covered her eyes and furiously rolled to put out the imaginary flames.

The fire drill -- a theatric rehearsal that included no real threats -- was part of an emergency preparedness presentation led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency at the school this week.

Nearly 100 Painted Rock fourth-graders, including Kaori, stopped, dropped and rolled, discussed emergency evacuation plans and learned other tips for being prepared for an emergency in the roughly hourlong program.

"I think it's really fun," the 9-year-old said, shortly after finishing a hands-on presentation with Poway firefighters that included trying on their gear. "There is so much to do, and you learn a lot."

Students rotated through five different activity stations, where they discussed first-aid techniques with Red Cross workers, what to put in a supply kit, how to safely evacuate a pet and care for them on the road, and drew pictures of what they had learned.

"It's really good because we are learning about what you should do," 9-year-old Angelica Madrid said, adding that she would definitely remember the lessons on evacuating animals and packing supply kits beforehand.

Painted Rock is one of two schools in Southern California, and the only one in North County, to participate in the new hands-on course for elementary students, titled FEMA for Kids.

The school was chosen by FEMA because it was one of the campuses in the district severely affected by the Witch Creek fire that destroyed 90 homes in October on the city's northern and eastern edges, FEMA spokesman Ken Higginbotham said.

Based on the interest of students and schools, Higginbotham said, the agency hopes to take the program to other schools in the area later this year.

"It's a pretty captivating (program)," Principal Jack Troxell said. "What make it so nice is it's so interactive. ... I would have loved to have it not long after the fires."

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Lessons in safety School closed for week after October wildfires

By Patty McCormac~UNION-TRIBUNE

POWAY – For students at Painted Rock Elementary School, a disaster isn't just a blurry concept, something that happens to someone else.

Most of them were evacuated during the early-morning hours of Oct. 22, when the best that fire officials could do was to warn people to get out of the way of the wind-driven firestorm. Some lost their homes. Their school closed for a week.

Those are a few reasons that the Federal Emergency Management Agency chose the Poway school to launch a pilot program in disaster preparedness for children. The class, called Preparedness Day, was filled with hands-on activities that taught the students how to "Be Aware – Prepare," so if there is a next time, they will be ready.

For Jack Troxell, the school's principal, it was an opportunity to help his students continue healing.

"It helps them put the disaster into prospective," Troxell said. "They can learn they don't have to be a victim and that they can prepare for it."

About 100 fourth-graders took part in the one-hour classes Tuesday and yesterday.

They learned how to transport and care for their pets should they need to be evacuated. "If it's not safe for you there, it's not safe for them there," said Roxie Crawford of FEMA.

Poway firefighter/paramedic Gary Anderson taught the children how to "stop, drop and roll" if their clothing catches fire, and the kids had the opportunity to try on gear worn by firefighters.

Puppets Sierra and Talli from the American Red Cross taught the children how to duck and cover during an earthquake and how to put together an emergency supply kit, since it could take up to 72 hours for emergency workers to reach them after a disaster.

A computer station signed on to fema.gov/kids and ready.gov provided instructions on how to make emergency kits and create a family evacuation plan.

Painted Rock Computer instructor Sue Halfaker said the event was valuable because it empowered students. "It gives them more of a sense of control than they had before," she said.

It did seem therapeutic for the students, who also could talk about their experiences.

Stella Gerson, 10, and her family had to evacuate their Poway home on very short notice.

"The fire was right down the hill," Stella said. She said she helped other family members pack what they could, then grabbed their dog, Blondie, and left – she in slippers and her brothers shoeless.

From yesterday's lessons, Stella learned how to evacuate pets and how to move a snake. No, she doesn't have a snake, but she learned that a pillowcase does the job. She said she also found out more about the Red Cross, wildfires and how the fire department works.



NELVIN CEPEDA / Union-Tribune
Audrey Davis, 10, suited up in firefighter gear with the help of fire Capt. Bill Clark (left) and firefighter/paramedic Gary Anderson of Poway Fire Department Station No. 2 yesterday at Painted Rock Elementary.

"We are teaching how to be prepared for any kind of disaster, whether natural and, of course, the susceptibility of terrorist attacks are real, so we engage in that as well," said Ken Higginbotham, an external-affairs officer for FEMA.

"Anytime there is a disaster of any kind, we want children to be prepared physically with the proper items for emergency preparedness kits and with the emotional and mental stability to be able to deal with an emergency evacuation should the need arise."

Higginbotham said he hopes the children will share what they learned at home so parents and guardians can be better prepared.

"This is a valuable program for youngsters of all ages," said Mike Hall, head of FEMA's wildfire recovery office in Southern California. "It's good for the kids, it's good for the family and it's good for the community. It teaches that all disasters are local."

FEMA officials wanted to try to program out in a smaller district before rolling it out in San Diego or Los Angeles, Higginbotham said. A video of the project will be given to the district and could be used on the FEMA Web site.