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FirePrevented.org's Felix Ledesma, left, Dan Carlson and Bill Braun visit with preschoolers in Woodbury in November. At Woodview Terrace Montessori preschool, Carlson dressed up in full firefighter gear to remind children not to be afraid of firefighters, and Braun told the children to remind their families to check their fire alarms at home. (Submitted photo)

Fire prevention starts young

By [Mathias Baden](#) on Dec 16, 2015 at 12:49 a.m.

“You are a firefighter.”

That is Bill Braun’s mantra.

Braun, retired from Woodbury Public Safety, and a corps of a dozen volunteers spend their spare time on visits with children, teaching life skills that prevent fires.

Braun owns a ruby-red fire truck and has started the nonprofit organization FirePrevented.org to further a good thing that the city of Woodbury started years ago. A firefighter and emergency medical technician, Braun earned an letter of outstanding

achievement and an achievement medal for public safety education while working for the city of Woodbury.

A few years ago, though, the city adjusted its fire prevention program, focusing on elementary-aged students and families while also hosting and coordinating a variety of public education and special events throughout the year that reach the spectrum of ages, birth to 99, said Michelle Okada, public information officer for Woodbury Public Safety. “We don’t believe there is a gap in our offerings.”

Braun left his position as coordinator of the city’s fire prevention program, and he retired from firefighting in 2014. He was injured on a call last year, carrying a heavy man during a rescue operation.

“I am now permanently firefighting on the fire prevention side of things,” said Braun, who also is temporarily out of work as an electrician, due to lifting restrictions.

Life after retirement

Former firefighters created the FirePrevented.org program after retirement from the local fire department.

Braun solicited the help of Felix Ledesma, who retired in 2010 as the longest-tenured member of Woodbury’s fire department and winner of the Five Star, a lifetime achievement award for firefighters.

Volunteers come from the ranks of active and retired firefighters, along with behind-the-scenes support from Jonathan Benson, Dominic Crolusesq and Jodell Miller, Braun said.

“We’re finding a sweet spot at age 4,” said Braun, who fathers five kids in Woodbury. “They’re really ready to learn. They are sponges. We have had some saves in Woodbury, when the 4-year-old called.”

What kids can do

Sometimes, though, tragedy can be unavoidable.

In 2005, Holly Yang died in a fatal fire.

Little did fire prevention staff know that they were talking to a group of her friends at school shortly after her death.

“What’s it like to be in a fire?” came one awfully hard question to answer.

Thankfully, Braun and others are skilled at changing such a question into a positive: “How important is it to have smoke alarms?”

Like city programs before it, inspiring open conversations between parents and children is the goal of FirePrevented.org, Braun said. Kids need to know what they can do to prevent fires.

Children should:

- know where to find a parent’s cellphone and the special number to call in case of emergency – 911. The disappearance of the home telephone is a challenge for firefighters. Almost half of homes don’t have a landline anymore, according to FirePrevented.org.
- be able to recite their home address in an emergency. Parents can describe the home address as having a first name (the house number) and a last name (the street name), Braun suggested.
- not to set fires. Fires and burns are the third-leading cause of accidental death among preschoolers. More than 40 percent of juvenile firesetters are younger than age 5, and more than 34 percent of their victims are themselves. Children mistakenly think they can control fires that they set, according to FirePrevented.org.
- talk to their parents about smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors. Batteries should be regularly changed, and escape drills made part of a family’s routine. Working fire alarms double a resident’s chance of surviving a fire.
- learn to never hide from fire or a firefighter. Since fire tends to double in size every 60 seconds, it’s important to quickly exit. Families should have a meeting place outside of their home, for just such an emergency. When practicing an escape drill, families should try more than one route to get out and stay out.

Owner of a firetruck

One key point of interest for children listening to a FirePrevented.org presentation is the firetruck.

Engine One was decommissioned in Viroqua, Wis., after serving as a quick-response engine for 30 years. A 22-footer – extraordinarily short for a fire truck – was eventually nicknamed Stubby. The Brauns purchased 1983 General Safety firetruck built in North Branch, Minn., from a Michigan collector of fire engines. “It’s actually personally owned by me,” Braun said.

After his injury, Braun's wife, Beth, asked him what he would miss most about firefighting. Not the early-morning wake-up calls, he recalled saying, but driving a firetruck.

"So my wife bought me a fire engine. She's a saint," Braun said, noting that buying a fire engine is not a "cheap date."

Vintage firetrucks with working fire apparatus – light bars and sirens included – are protected by law.

Donations help

FirePrevented.org, unaffiliated with the city of Woodbury, relies on donations to provide its lifesaving fire prevention programs.

One of the big supporters of FirePrevented.org is the local Firehouse Subs.

Braun and his family were eating at the sandwich shop when he asked if the owners would like to get involved in the community. He loaned his firetruck to the business for a parade float and the partnership grew.

The firetruck has made other parade appearances. Sometimes Braun drives the firetruck to lunch. Frequently he brings it to Boy Scouts functions. He's made visits to churches, talking about fires in a nonthreatening way.

"The big use of the firetruck has been the prevention methods," Braun said.

FirePrevented.org is a 501c3 nonprofit organization. It is unaffiliated with the city of Woodbury. Donations may be made payable to: FirePrevented.org, c/o United Educators Credit Union, 6789 Upper Afton Road, Woodbury, MN 55125. For more information, to volunteer, or to schedule a fire prevention program, visit FirePrevented.org.



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