

Eager Teens Gain Hands-On Experience In Morris Township's Junior Firefighter Program

By Fire Chief Craig Goss

The Morris Township Fire Department and the Township Committee have teamed together to meet a mutual goal – getting teenagers interested in firefighting service so that youths who volunteer might develop into future firefighters for the Township. A recent Junior Firefighter graduate, Drew Wnek, is evidence of the program's success. "Being a junior volunteer firefighter helped me gain experiences a person my age would not normally have. I encourage others to give it a try," he said.

The program gives high school students the opportunity to learn through both classroom instruction and hands-on experience. Teenage recruits take 135 hours of training at the Morris County Firefighters and Police Training Academy. Once the initial training is completed, the teens report to the Collinsville Fire Station, one of five fire stations in Morris Township along with Fairchild, Hillside, Mt. Kemble, and Woodland. There they join with adult firefighters in attending meetings, participating in monthly training exercises, and riding out on calls.

Wnek said, "It has been awesome going out to help people. I have a different perspective now after fighting a fire that destroyed a home, helping care for elderly folks evacuated from a building, and participating in drills with other firefighters. I enjoy going on calls and was able to do everything as a junior that adult volunteers do, except for going inside a burning building."

"NJ state law prohibits junior firefighters from entering a burning building or being placed in harm's way. We explain the safeguards in the program to parents in detail," said Fire Chief Craig Goss. The youths are provided with pagers and can be 'on call' daily, coming to the scene of an emergency to assist adult fire personnel. However, receiving a page does not obligate a teen response due to their junior status.

Training exercises include working fire hoses, raising and lowering fire truck ladders, operating equipment on fire trucks, and familiarizing themselves with all the other rescue tools such as self-contained breathing apparatus. They also learn CPR, get first aid instruction, and participate in various fire and smoke simulations. In addition to gaining a good knowledge of fire protection and safety, junior firefighters also learn the value of responsibility, teamwork, and leadership.

Wnek's mother said, "To see Drew take on this role makes my husband and me very proud. Through the program's rigorous practical and academic training, as well as the required discipline, Drew has developed a more mature understanding of community."

After junior firefighters turn 18, they are eligible for an additional 15 hours of training which allows them to graduate to full-fledged firefighters after passing a required NJ certification examination. Drew Wnek said, "I passed the written and physical tests and have now graduated from the junior program. I fully intend to continue as a volunteer. I even asked several admissions directors if there was an opportunity to volunteer while I am away at college."



Pictured: Drew Wnek in dress uniform at Peapack where Morris Township won a trophy in the marching competition during a firefighter parade.

Another junior firefighter graduate, Brian McNally, is equally pleased to have had an opportunity to participate in this volunteer program. What he learned will be put to good use as he has recently been nominated by Congressman Rodney Frelinghuysen to the Naval Academy at Annapolis.

Chief Goss said, "Fire science is offered as a major in certain colleges. In addition to being a volunteer or paid firefighter, there are other significant career opportunities associated with learning about firefighting, including jobs in security & protective services, insurance loss protection, arson investigation, architecture, and even construction. The advantages from being a junior firefighter can go on for a lifetime."

There have been five high school youths involved in the Township's Junior Firefighter Program – Daniel Goss (Morristown), Jack Lachford (Delbarton), Grant Lechman (Morristown), Brian McNally (Morristown) and Drew Wnek (Seton Hall Preparatory). More teens have expressed interest in joining the program during the coming year.

"Our residents receive Fire Services provided in large part by volunteers, with real cost savings to the Township," said Mayor Robert Nace. "Getting our youth introduced to volunteer service early helps prepare them for a more rewarding life. We are truly fortunate to have such generous young people in Morris Township. Their families should be extremely proud of them."

Teenagers and their parents who would like to do something important for the community are encouraged to join this program. For more information about the Junior Firefighter Program, please contact Morris Township Fire Chief Craig Goss at (973) 326-7461.