GETTING TO KNOW YOU: Police, Firefighters Show Tenants, Kids A Good Time

Joe Wiercinski, Sharon HERALD, September 14, 2015

Sirens wail and fire trucks come roaring down the street. Smoke billows from the windows of homes and apartments. Police jump out of cruisers to chase suspects through backyards after residents hear gunfire. All too often, there are emergencies like that in the New Castle Avenue, George and Mesabi streets Sharon neighborhood the safety forces know as Zone 5. Seeing them fighting fires and crime is one way children see police and firefighters in action.

On Thursday, they got a different look at the safety forces during an afternoon picnic hosted by Mercer County Housing Authority at Malleable Heights apartments on Quinby Street. This time, there was a spirit of fun and exploration in the air instead of fears of danger.

Cpl. Mike Albanese, one of six policemen on hand, sat on the sidewalk surrounded by half a dozen children. Other kids checked out the police cruisers parked nearby, asking questions and making up their own versions of radio calls.

Some sat in the driver’s seat, taking turns at the wheel of engine 2 and 3 and imagining themselves rushing to save others at a fire. All the children – the safety forces, too – munched on hot dogs, hamburgers and chips supplied by the housing authority and police department. Younger children got coloring books and crayons to take home.

Sa’maya Brockman had Albanese’s attention all to herself for a few minutes, crunching chips while he coaxed the 3-year-old to take a bite of the hot dog on her plate. Soon enough, she did, making it seem like it was her own idea.

Older kids ran around behind one of the pumpers where firefighter Darryl Torrence sprayed them with water while they shrieked in delight. “You’re on fire,” the smiling Torrence said. “I’ve got to hose you down!” He let the kids take turns holding the hose and spraying water that fell like rain on the others. “When I shot it up in the air it was warm but when it came back down, it was freezing,” 11-year-old Carrie Budetich said.

DeAra Day stood on the bumper of the other fire truck learning about the job from part-time firefighter John Miller, who is also an emergency medical technician. The 9-year-old girl listened attentively but decided firefighting isn’t for her. “I can’t do it, it’s too hard,” DeAra said. “I want to be a chef when I grow up and I want to make all cakes.”

Firefighting sounded plenty interesting to Synceire Hawkins, who was working over a grape Popsicle while talking to part-time firefighter Steve Stilson. “I’d like to do it,” the 9-year-old boy said. “It’s good to serve people.”
Police Chief Gerry Smith said he was pleased to see the children playing and hanging out with the safety forces during the picnic. “This is a chance for them to see police and firefighters as people, just like they are,” he said. “They can sit down and have a hot dog or hamburger together. It also builds trust.”

Sheila White, property manager for the housing authority, said the picnic seemed like a good way to mark the end of summer. “It’s great. It gives the kids a chance to get to know the police and the firefighters,” she said. “It makes the tenants feel safe and it builds a relationship between the tenants, the police and the housing authority.”