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Damascus safety fair draws more than 150 visitors

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Hazel Strahorn took her two grandchildren to the third annual Damascus Emergency Preparedness and Safety Fair on Saturday to let them know that people in the community care about their safety.

It was the second time Strahorn, of Damascus, attended with Cameron Horst, 10, and Megan Horst, 7, of Gaithersburg. “You want them to get as much information about safety as possible,” Strahorn said.

Damascus residents got a chance to pet rescue dogs, tour emergency response vehicles and learn how to plan for an emergency. More than 150 people attended the fair, which was sponsored by the Damascus Emergency Preparedness Team.

Representatives from the Montgomery County Police Department and county fire service talked to residents about the resources available during an emergency. Horses from the Trail Riders of Today Search and Rescue Team, with chapters in Montgomery as well as eight other Maryland counties, were also on hand. Members of the county recreation department helped train youngsters how to safely ride their bikes.

Cameron Horst said one of his favorite parts of the fair was the bike training. He smiled as he wore a balloon hat on his head.

“It was fun,” he said. “There was tons of stuff to do and people tell you about what they are doing.” He also learned that if there is a fire he should feel the walls of the house with his hand before entering a room to see if they are hot. His sister Megan liked riding the bikes and petting the horses.

Kathee Henning, a Community Emergency Response Team member from the Gaithersburg-Washington Grove Volunteer Fire Department, gave 50 youngsters and 25 adults a tour of the Gaithersburg Safety Fire House — the only one of its type in the county. The firehouse features a living room, kitchen and bedroom. The tour lasts 30 minutes and is used to teach children ages 4-12 about best fire safety practices. Smoke and heat are simulated. Henning said she instructed the residents to look for two ways out when entering a new room,

never put paper towels on a stove, and feel walls for heat in the case of a fire. Youngsters exited the building through the windows and adults left through the door. “The big message is to get low and go,” Henning said.

Paul Laing, the president of the Damascus Emergency Preparedness Team, said he thought the fair was a success even though the rainy weather early in the morning might have discouraged some people from coming. He also said the decision to move the fair from a local church to the Damascus Volunteer Fire Department this year paid off because there was more parking. “We wanted to gear the emphasis to families and children,” Laing said.

Linda Panagoulis, the director of the Damascus Community Center, taught children the best practices for riding their bikes safely. More than 50 children rode bikes through the obstacle course and received personal training from the staff members. “The idea is children becoming aware there are other elements around them,” Panagoulis said. “They have to be aware of how to look both ways.”

Residents also learned during the fair that they should prepare an emergency kit to be ready for a hurricane or a terrorist attack. The kit should include nine essential items: water, food, clothing, medications, a flashlight, a can opener, a radio, hygiene products and a first aid kit.

Longtime Damascus resident Kathleen Magruder attended the fair with her husband, David, and said it is important to learn about being prepared because of the possibility of a terrorist attack. “I feel like I’m more prepared for an emergency now,” Kathleen Magruder said.

Rick Bauer, a career master firefighter from the Damascus Volunteer Fire Department, gave Tours of the fire engine with volunteers from the department and said it was a great way to reach out to the community. “A lot of people think it just has a hose and water,” Bauer said of the engine. “They don’t realize we have equipment for medical emergencies.”

Laurie Platt, the assistant commander of the Trail Riders of Today Search and Rescue team, said more than 20 youngsters stopped by to pet two of the horses from the search team. The group helps find missing people in four states, including Maryland. The children enjoyed feeding the horses cookies, she said. “The horses we brought are very good with people,” Platt said. “The kids enjoyed them.” The Damascus Emergency Preparedness and Safety Fair impressed her, she said. “It is great to see the people in this area talking about disaster preparedness,” Platt said. “Most of us don’t have a plan.”