

Vernonia Fire Explorers Learn Career Skills

By Scott Laird

The Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District (VRFPD) has a new program available for youth. It's called the Fire Protection Explorers, and it is providing hands-on experiential learning

of the Boy Scouts of America. But the Explorer program is open to both males or females and participants are not required to be members of Boy Scouts.

The current group of fourteen Vernonia Explorers are still on probation, but Ramsey says once they have shown

really great places."

According to Herbert, school comes first for Explorers. "We have requirements that you have to have a certain GPA to be a member," explains Herbert. "Extracurricular activities that are associated with school come before this. School is, first and foremost, the priority-- their grades and their studies. They have to want to be here and we hold them accountable. We hold them to a very high standard. Anyone caught smoking or chewing tobacco or participating in any other illegal activities will be immediately let go from the program."

Herbert's experience with the Explorer program in Gresham looks like it will be helpful as Vernonia develops their program. "Gresham was a premier program to be in," says Herbert. "Other organizations and agencies go there to see what they do-- how they run it. They have officers in the program. They have the ability to move up through the ranks and get certain responsibilities. They get to learn how to drive the apparatus and how the pumps work."

"Our goal is that, when they are done with this Explorer program-- when they turn eighteen-- they will be able to walk right into a volunteer role. They are going to be far ahead of the game and they are going to have a good base under them."

I spoke with three of the members of the Vernonia Explorers: Jake Bringman, Kendrick Leaverton and Josh Butcher. All three said they were

out and go to a full-time firefighter job," says Leaverton. "I want to learn how to use all the tools, go on to Fire Academy and get my Firefighter I and maybe even Firefighter II and go on to a career," said Butcher.

Ramsey is still developing the program, including the task book the Explorers will be required to complete to pass probation. "Once they finish probation, some of the best and most proficient will be promoted to officers in the Explorer ranks," says Ramsey. "Then they become the leaders for the next group of Explorer recruits. They will end up almost running themselves. The officers will run some of the drills, with some supervision."

The Explorers will look to recruit a new class each fall as the programs develops.

Ramsey likes the hands-on approach to the Explorers program. In the past there has been a Fire Science program in conjunction with the local school district, but that was focused more on book learning. "We will do both a little classroom and a little hands-on," says Ramsey. "When we have a Burn-to-Learn, we will utilize the Explorers so they can see how they will assist the firefighters in a real firefighting situation." In fact, Ramsey says the VRFPD has a practice burn scheduled for December 4th, where the Explorers will get an opportunity to observe.

The Vernonia Explorer program appears to be a win-win for everybody. Local youth interested in a career in



Josh Butcher practices using a fire extinguisher as part of a training exercise with the newly formed Vernonia Fire Explorers Post 900.

for youth interested in volunteering or a career in fire service and a chance to explore potential opportunities.

"The idea of the Explorers is to give the kids, if they are interested in a career in either fire or Emergency

proficiency in a series of tasks, they will have completed their probationary period and will be available to respond to calls and assist the emergency responders and fire fighters in a limited capacity on real calls.

"We are going to concentrate on the firefighting side, but we will work through the EMS aspects and chain of command and Incident Command," says Ramsey. "If we have a fire investigation going on, they can take part and observe to see what we are looking for."

Having a local Explorer program also offers a somewhat obvious advantage for the VRFPD-- it can be a recruiting tool for volunteers. "Hopefully, when they turn eighteen, they can go from Explorer to volunteer firefighter," says Ramsey.

Jonathan Herbert is a new volunteer and instructor with VRFPD and sits on the Executive Committee for the Explorer program, along with Ben Davis and Randy Carlton. Herbert was an Explorer himself with Gresham Fire starting in 1992. He was also previously a volunteer for Clackamas County Fire for eleven years and with Scappoose Fire for three years.

"I know of some Explorers who, straight out of the Explorer program, got hired as firefighters by Portland, by Gresham, by Tualatin Fire and Rescue, by Clackamas Fire," says Herbert about the opportunities an Explorer program can provide. "It's taken people some



Jake Bringman learns how to connect a fire hose.

Medical Services (EMS), some real experience," says Tom Ramsey, a Lieutenant with VRFPD, who is the Head Advisor for Explorer Post 900.

The overall program is overseen by an Executive Committee. The Head Advisor, with help from Assistant Advisors, runs the weekly training, activities, and drills on Wednesday evenings at the Vernonia Fire Station. The program is open to young men and women who have complete the eighth grade and are fourteen years of age. In Vernonia, youth can participate in the program until they reach the age of eighteen, at which time they would be eligible to apply to join the VRFPD as regular volunteers.

"When they complete the Explorer program when they turn eighteen, they can go to the Fire Recruit Academy and they will already almost have their Firefighter I certification, because we are teaching them the Firefighter I curriculum," says Ramsey.

According to Ramsey, the Explorer program operates under the charter of the Cascade Pacific Council



The Vernonia Fire Explorers don their safety equipment as they get ready for a drill.

interested in the same thing-- a future career in firefighting. "I'm looking for knowledge-- just anything to help me put myself above everyone else," said Bringman. "I am hoping to go through Recruit Academy, then volunteer with Vernonia Fire and then hopefully move

firefighting are getting to experience the work first-hand and serve their community, while the local VRFPD is getting an early start on recruiting potential volunteers-- volunteers who will come on board with knowledge and experience.



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