

Preparing for the worst



-Messenger photos by Hans Madsen

JERRY ESLICK, training chief for the West Des Moines Fire Department, helps guide the rope for Malcolm Royer, with the Dallas Center Fire Department as he makes his first trip down the side of Iowa Central Community College's parking garage Saturday afternoon during the 11th annual North Area Training Academy educational conference. Students in the High Angle Rope Rescue class learned about high level rescue work.

Former FD fire chief returns to teach high-level rescue work

By **HANS MADSEN**
Messenger staff writer

Otho firefighter Patrick Bennett looked a little nervous Saturday afternoon as he stood on top of the Iowa Central Community College parking ramp's ledge, about 40 feet from the ground, surrounded by other firefighters and their instructor Jerry Eslick.

After announcing he was ready with a loud "Belay," he walked backward — off the ledge.

A few seconds later, Eslick offered him his first bit of advice as he began the trip down the side of the structure back to terra firma, "Breathe," he shouted.

"You can breathe now."

Bennett did and completed his trek, which included hanging upside down and letting go of the rope clamped onto his climbing rig, successfully.

Eslick, training chief for the West Des Moines Fire

Department and former Fort Dodge fire chief, explained how the training in high-level rescue work will serve the firefighters in their duties,

"Ethanol plants, windmills, water towers, cranes and for us in Des Moines, rescuing window washers," he said.

He also explained his philosophy toward his classes.

"Prepare for the worst," he said. "Train to be the best."

The level of training for firefighters has gotten better and more sophisticated during the past several decades,

"It used to be that putting out fires was our main job," he said. "Now it's a lot of EMS work too."

Additionally, firefighting has gotten more technical and the required gear, both better — and more expensive.

Eslick explained that 50 years ago, a set of turnout gear cost about \$50. The cost today, is around \$2,000 with



COLIN CHINERY, with the Kelley Fire Department, grins and bears it as fellow firefighters Jim Henderson, of Stuart, right, and Dale Duncan, of Sac City, help "Rescue" him from a bin full of corn during a grain bin rescue class at the educational conference.

another \$4,000 for the self-contained breathing apparatus. The training required for Firefighter I and II certification can add another \$5,000 to \$6,000.

"That's just basic training," he said.

Malcolm Royer, of Dallas Center, was the first student over the edge, it was his first time rappelling.

"It was fun," he said. "I was just a little nervous at first going over the edge."

His own department has a grain elevator and he frequently works on roofs as well. He expects his training to be useful in both situations.

He also has a healthy respect for elevations and working safely when above the ground,

"You have to be scared of heights," he said. "If you're not, you die."

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Randall Scott, a member of the current West Des Moines recruit class agreed with Royer,

"It keeps you safe," he said.

Across campus, the over 500 students and instructors who attended this year were busy with a number of other classes, some were learning to enter burning rooms in a simulator, other were learning to operate the pumping equipment on a fire truck and another group were literally getting buried in their work.

Merle Burris, of Stuart, had just finished getting "rescued"

from a corn bin, his turnout coat was covered with corn dust from the experience.

"It's quite an experienced," he said. "You can't move, can't wiggle your toes or nothing."

Don Ashenfelter, with the Badger Fire Department, who was teaching the class, explained that corn packs around the victim,

"The more you move the tighter it packs," he said.

Getting the victim out means getting the corn away from them, using plywood panels sunk into the grain

around the victim, it's scooped out by hand. Ashenfelter explained that a victim can't simply be pulled out.

"If you have somebody buried up to their neck," he said. "It takes 900 pounds of pressure to pull them out."

As some of the students worked to pull Colin Chinery, of Kelley, out of the corn, he said he could feel the pressure from the grain.

"It's not something I'd do every day by choice," he said.

Once the classes are over, the students will be taking

valuable skills back to their departments throughout Iowa, many of them, like Patrick Bennett from Otho, have been on plenty of calls already, some are just starting out and have yet to go on their first alarm but many of them share Bennett's hope that the day when it's real and they have to use the training doesn't come.

"I hope that I never have to," Bennett said.

Contact Hans Madsen at (515) 573-2141 or hmadsen@messengernews.net