

THE LAST WORD

Fire Protection Trailer

BY JOHN GIBSON, WASHINGTON COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

The flames of a late night house fire near West Fork, Arkansas, that killed three young boys on April 18, 2001 have long been extinguished, but the repercussions of that night are still being felt throughout Washington County.

The fire probably started near a wood-burning stove in the rental house and spread rapidly throughout the structure. While the parents escaped unharmed, the three boys, a six-year-old and two four-year-olds, could not reach safety. The house had no smoke detectors, and the six-year-old had no training in what to do in case of a fire.

This incident prompted county officials to take a look at what the county could have done to prevent this tragedy. The most obvious shortcoming in the dwelling was the lack of smoke detectors. The second observation was the lack of training of school-age children in fire prevention and what to do in case of a fire.

While the two largest school districts in the county had city fire marshals and fire education in the schools, the six more rural districts had no fire marshal and no real fire training in their schools. Washington County Judge Jerry Hunton led the initiative to create a position for a County Fire Marshal with full powers of the State Fire Marshal, and more importantly, the ability to go into the schools in the county and train the children there.

As is the case for most counties in Arkansas, funds were not there to pay a fire marshal and equip his office for education and enforcement. In 2002, the county applied for and received a grant from the state to pay a fire marshal's salary for the first year. The second year, the county began to pay the salary, but for the most part, the fire marshal depended on contributions to begin a campaign to provide smoke detectors in the county. The one thing that was still missing was a means to provide fire education in the six rural school districts.

The county looked at commercial "travel trailers" that had been converted to "fire education trailers." Again the costs (\$16,000 to \$24,000) were prohibitive.

Enter Jim Smith and the Arkansas Federal Surplus Property Program. The Arkansas Federal Surplus Property Program (FSP) located at 8700 Remount Road, NLR, AR annually donates to 1,800 active donor organizations federal surplus property valued in excess of \$9-million. Everything from paper clips to airplanes, file cabinets to dump trucks, desks to boats, comes through FSP to those General Service Administration (GSA) approved organizations that serve the public. Jim Smith introduced an email service to the donees in December 1999. Since that date, the database has grown from 600 to 37,000 email addresses statewide. Every time a truck arrives full of property, a property listing is sent out. John Gibson received such a listing and the rest is history.

The 31-foot extended, year-old living room travel trailer Washington County was able to acquire for a \$3,500 administrative handling charge is one of those items donated by FSP. The trailer was just what we needed to convert to a fire education trailer. John Gibson knew that the county did not have the funding for a \$30,000 to \$40,000



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training trailer, but could afford to convert the FSP trailer into a safety training unit.

Many people, businesses, schools and especially volunteer fire departments pitched in to convert the trailer. Couches and chairs were removed along with bedroom furniture to make an education room where the kids can sit on benches and watch fire education tapes on a donated television and a donated sound system. They can then go into the next room that is filled with artificial smoke so that they can use the skills that they learned to escape the room, and meet at a predetermined place. The trailer has been to all six school districts, county fairs, and fire department events. Over 3,000 kids have gone through the program to date.

None of this would have been possible without the affordable trailer provided through the surplus property program. The children of rural Washington County owe a great deal to this program. Countless thousands of children will have a chance at living a long life as a result of safety training in Washington County's fire safety training trailer and the FSP program. If we have saved one child's life, it has all been worth it. ♦

About the Author:

John Gibson is lifelong resident of Northwest Arkansas. He became involved in fire service in the late 1970's when a city fire department refused to leave city limits to extinguish a house fire a few hundred yards away.

He was one of five founding members of the Round Mountain Fire Department. He served on the board and as a firefighter before moving to the Wedington community to serve on that board and as Fire Chief. He served ten years as President of the Washington County Rural Fire Association and on the Washington County 9-1-1 advisory board for eight years. He was hired as director of Washington County 9-1-1 operations and emergency services coordinator in 1994 where he served until 1999 and then assumed the position of County Administrator. He points with the most pride to the Washington County Fire Marshal's Office (the first county fire marshal's office in the state) and the excellent job that the fire marshal has done to promote fire education with the children in the smaller rural schools in the county (seven districts). He notes that he has had a small part in accomplishing quality fire education and prevention in Washington County. The best of ideas can be nothing without the best of people to carry out those ideas. They certainly have that here in Arkansas.

