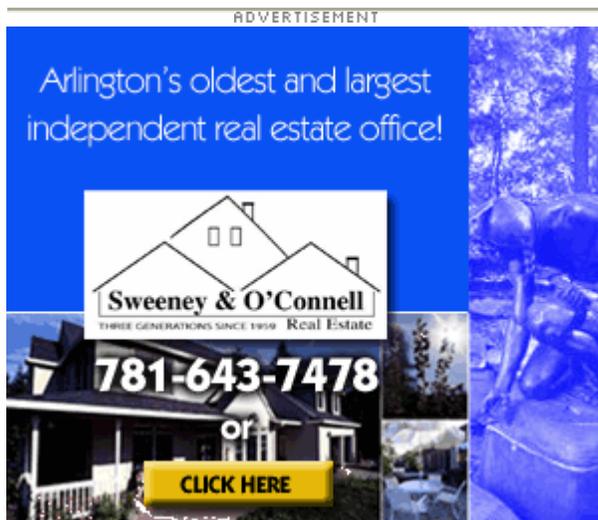


Explorers on-hand to assist in emergencies

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By Shauna Staveley/Staff Writer
GateHouse News Service
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Arlington, Mass. -

Age varies widely, as do interests — but volunteering turns this diverse group into a family.

The Arlington Auxillary Fire Department's Arlington Explorer Post 911 responds to all kinds of situations, such as the chemical explosion in Danvers that resulted in a 10-alarm fire on Nov. 22, 2006 and the heavy rain, which threatened an Arlington dam on May 6, 2007. The nine members came together on Monday to discuss their efforts, and while doing so, they gave off the distinct impression that their respect and fondness for each other completes the volunteer experience.

"We started out as you know, two friends here, two friends there, but then it really develops," said Mark Roche, who is also a Police Officer.

An example of the bond they share would be that two members who spoke on Monday, Chris and Laurie Gibbons are married, and met through the program.

"We have a lot of familial relations," Laurie Gibbons said. "Like we have a brother and sister, two brothers and a sister, we have two brothers' cousins — whether it's a friend or relative or whatever. We just kind of intermingle and develop from there."

Gibbons has a degree in political science and a certificate in Legal Studies from Northeastern University.

The brother and sister are Jim and Katie Sullivan. Jim is a 19-year-old sophomore Business Information Technology major at Framingham State College, while Katie is 15, majoring in Culinary at Minuteman High School in Lexington.

"The greatest part of the experience for me has been helping the community, and winning first place at the National Conference," Katie said.

The group placed first in Paramedical Biking at the 2007 National Fire/Emergency Services Exploring Conference held at the Illinois Fire Service Institute of the University of Illinois. The even began June 18 and lasted four days.

Chris Gibbons said Arlington Explorer Post 911 was created in 1991, through the Minuteman Council of Boy Scouts. They work with the Emergency Management Agency and many end up in careers related to what they contributed as volunteers with the Explorers.

Patricia Kelly, a 17-year-old Senior at Minuteman High School said she wants to become a firefighter, as does Dan O'Leary, another volunteer.

"I'm trying to get into the fire service, so this is a stepping stone for me, to do what I've got to do," O'Leary said.

The Explorers work together on various activities. Roche said the group participates in structured fire-fighting search and rescue education, and they also learn about investigations, particularly arson.

While they know all of the basic firefighter operations, the Explorers do not actually fight any fires. They are simply there to assist the Arlington Fire Department behind-the-scenes when situations arise.

"Anywhere they need more help, we try to bring things like water and other items. We set up rehabilitation fans, cooling fans, water stations, some coffee, hot soup and some blankets," Roche said.

Roche was quick to correct the misconception that they are strictly focused on fire-related volunteer efforts. He said their fieldwork includes traffic control and emergency management. They are CPR certified, and trained on relief shelters and operations — they are a FEMA recognized community response team.

While the Explorers pay for their own equipment and uniforms, they said are assisted by various town organizations that send letters of support and contributed nearly \$1,000 dollars towards their expenses this year. The volunteer group also participates in fundraising events to ease their costs, such as a bike and yard sale, running the microphones for town meetings, and serving hot dogs at town night.

Roche said the work is strictly on a volunteer basis. No one gets paid for what they do.

Jim Sullivan said the group is actively looking for members, and anyone above the age of 14 can join the Arlington Explorer Post 911.

"This experience has helped me get a new understanding of myself," 17-year-old, Northeastern Freshman Michael Loud said of his time as a volunteer. "I gained a new family. Yes, I helped the town, but I am more prepared to go on in life. I want to be in law enforcement. Floods, the National Conference, Town Days — it is hard to say anything in specific is rewarding, because anything in general (as an Explorer) is a reward."