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## [Firefighters Practice In Donated House, Set For Demolition](#)

Tue, Mar 9, 2010

[Community](#), [Video](#)

In the thick of a smoke so oppressive that visibility was cut to a couple feet, the shadowy figures of the firefighters drifted in and out of sight. But their voices on the radio were loud and clear.

"We've got a victim," called the tinny voice. "We're trying to bring him out."

Over the next 10 minutes, the pair struggled to pull a 200-pound dummy through the house, unable to see their path through the thick of fake smoke. The exercise simulated what a real fire would have been like, without the fire.

The display was part of a rare but valuable training opportunity given to firefighters from the West University Place Fire Department. Over the past couple of weeks they've been able to practice life-saving fire drills just blocks from their station, saving the department money while helping fulfill the firefighters' continuing education requirements. It's all thanks to Abhishek Gami and his wife Candace TenBrink, West University Place residents of just six months.

The Gami family purchased the lot directly behind their own house to transform it into a new backyard, and they said they wanted to somehow give back to the community in the process. That's when they decided to donate the old cottage in the 4200 block of Byron Street to the fire department for a few weeks before demolishing the house.

"We love the fire department, we love the work they do. We're really happy to let them have their chance and do their work on the house before we hack it up and haul it away," Gami said. "Why not have them get a lot of value from something that's not useful to us?"

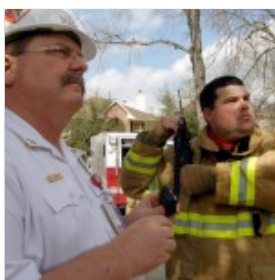
Firefighters have used the house to practice primary search techniques — Searching for victims and rescuing them, and finding and extinguishing the center of the “fire.” They have practiced methods of ventilating burning structures to get the heat and smoke out while firefighters enter to do their work. They have hacked multiple holes in walls to practice how to escape when walls or ceilings collapse.

“It’s a great opportunity for us to come and get some hands-on training,” said Lt. Aaron Taylor, who supervises the department’s “C” shift. “We don’t have a whole lot of fire calls in West University. When we do, that’s the most dangerous thing we do. It has to do with firefighter safety, and the more we can train on it, the more prepared we’ll be when that day comes.”

*Click photos to enlarge. Story continues below.*



Brent Gorman, firefighter EMT, dresses for the primary search training exercise.



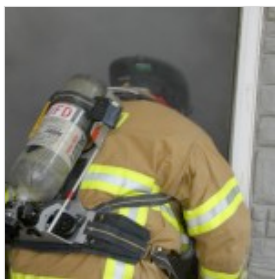
West U. Assistant Fire Chief Alton Seward, left, and Firefighter EMT Brent Gorman listen to instructions for a primary search exercise.



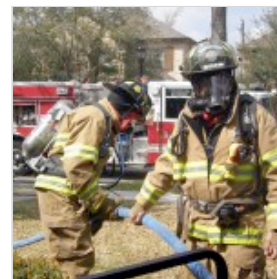
One of the steps in a primary search is setting up an attack line fire hose.



Firefighters have practiced search and rescue, ventilation methods, escaping from burning houses, and more.



The search team prepares to enter the house to find fire victims.



The rapid intervention team, or RIT, stands ready to rescue firefighters inside the “burning” house if they need help.



Firefighters rescued a 200-pound dummy from the "fire" in the Byron Street house.



The fire drills count towards the 20 hours of fire training continuing education that firefighters must complete each year.

West U. Fire Chief Steve Ralls said he estimates the department gets about two donated homes per year for training exercises, although the number could be more or less depending on the year. When residents donate houses, it brings several benefits over and above the inherent value of the training itself. Firefighters are required by law to get 20 hours of continuing education in firefighting per year, and the exercises at donated homes count towards that requirement.

Training at donated homes also saves money. The department must pay rental fees to conduct training exercises at official fire training facilities, and also pays overtime because the facilities are too far away, requiring firefighters to train while off duty since they wouldn't be able to return to West U. fast enough if there were a fire.

"We're happy. We like to be able to stay in the city and train, and have this hands-on, practical experience," Ralls said. "We can't get that every day."

The training at the Byron Street house has been so lifelike it has garnered attention from many residents on the street. Henry Stelzig, who lives right next to the house, said he thought it was a real emergency, and he wished firefighters would have notified neighbors not to worry.

"We were alarmed because, gosh, they had two ambulances out here, they had two fire trucks, they had everything," Stelzig said. "We thought the house was on fire."

But Gami, who already knew the commotion was only a training drill, said the department's activities have been a new source of entertainment for the whole family, including his 4-year-old daughter, Ava. The family watches the drills through their upstairs window, and frequently visits the firefighters during training time.

"They show her all their gear, they let her jump on their fire engine and check it out," Gami said. "Our daughter just loves it."

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