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EDITORIAL

Inside the Maze: Learning the Ins and Outs of the Hinesville Fire Department

HINESVILLE, Ga. (June 15, 2019) – *On Thursday and Friday, May 16 and 17, Hinesville Public Relations Manager Whitney Morris – Reed spent the morning watching and participating in the Hinesville Fire Department’s bi-annual maze training.*

The occupation of firefighter has many romanticized ideas surrounding it these days. There is a great deal of the use of the word “hero” when we discuss first responders in general, but what do we, the general public, actually know about what it takes to be a firefighter?

As Public Relations Manager, it is not only my duty to report to the citizens of Hinesville the pertinent events, programs and activities happening inside our city limits; it is my job to get to know the City as a whole and tell our story. The story of the Hinesville Fire Department is an interesting one. Here is a very small sample of the highlights:

- HFD provides fire services to the City of Flemington and support to Walthourville, Liberty County, Ft. Stewart and Gum Branch.
- Many of our firefighters have prior military service.
- Fire Station 2 is built into the base of one of Hinesville’s water towers.
- The leadership of HFD believes in training and readiness.

That last one may not be much of a surprise to many people. I certainly knew that there was a fair amount of in-service training happening, even when no one was watching. However, after spending two days watching – and one day participating – I have to say that the level to which firefighters hold themselves accountable for being ready and able to perform in the face of a fire event is a high one.

Behind HFD’s Fire Station 2 sits a small house; the approximately 600 square feet interior of which is designed to be a 3-level training maze. It’s hot; it has obstacles; and it is not comfortable, even without the turnout gear. The “hallways” are narrow; the stairs are steep; and even though it does not look finished at first glance, it is more than enough to be frustrating and exhausting.

The maze is a training exercise that all firefighters must complete twice per year. They wear all their turnout gear, which includes a helmet, coat, pants, gloves, mask, air tank and a blindfold.

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The blindfold is not a part of their routine attire, but it serves its purpose well in simulating the blinding effect a smoke-filled house can have on your ability to easily navigate a structure fire.

As they move through the maze, training officers and fellow firefighters call out both words of encouragement and reminders. There are no windows to escape through, so you must keep climbing up. To fit through this space, you are going to have to lay flat and slide. The floor shifts beneath you; there is a tangle of wires and cords and loose carpet to navigate – again, this is blind and just the first and second floor. Not counting the jump (climb) of roughly 4 feet to get to the second floor – or at least it felt like it to me.

I attempted the maze on Friday. As I moved through the first and second floors, trying to conserve my air and not panic when I thought I might get stuck in some fairly tight spaces, three members of the Hinesville Fire Department coached me through the process of conquering the maze and gave me some insight into navigating blind (which I thankfully was not).

In the event they are trapped in a house and cannot see, firefighters find a wall and follow it. One shoulder maintains contact with the wall while the other hand sweeps in front of them to combat obstacles and impediments; eventually, the wall should lead to a door or window – providing an opportunity for escape. If it does not, you find a way to go up and get to a window; maintaining shoulder contact at all times.

In the maze, there is no escape but up.

I needed help getting onto the second floor, I will admit it. Even with the training officer reminding me that the end result would not be pleasant if I were in a real house fire. Without assistance, I could not make the jump between the first and second floor and I will own that.

Give me shifting floors and crawling through ninety degree turns any day, because the third level of the maze is crawling through two series of rafters and then slowly coming down the stairs in a sitting position. The stairs were great. It was definitely the rafters that made me question my decision to agree to go through the maze for a second time (the jump between floors being the first). I genuinely thought I was not going to fit through those tiny gaps in the beams, but I did. Even if it was touch and go for a few minutes there.

If I was a firefighter, they would have timed me and checked my air consumption when I finally got to the bottom of the attic stairs. If I was a firefighter, they would have made me go through the second set of rafters.



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What they did was give me a tiny window into what it takes to be a firefighter in the face of an actual emergency. The experience was a great one, because so often we find ourselves just calling them the heroes without taking time to really think about what it means to be ready to go into a flaming building. Without appreciating the time and energy it takes to get to that point.

The Hinesville Fire Department works exceptionally hard to keep our community and surrounding areas safe – responding not only to fire calls but also medical ones. The leadership enforces consistent training to keep HFD employees ready and able to respond to any and all emergencies. It is hard work. I knew it before, but now I have a better understanding of this and an even deeper respect for the men and women of the Hinesville Fire Department.

To learn more about the Hinesville Fire Department, please visit cityofhinesville.org/122/Fire-Department. To see photos from the firefighters' and Whitney's trips through the maze, visit us on Facebook at facebook.com/HinesvilleGA. The City of Hinesville will be doing more "ridealong" styled editorials with different departments for the general public to get a birds' eye view into the inner-workings of the City. The next one will be published in August 2019.

ABOUT THE CITY OF HINESVILLE:

The City of Hinesville was established in 1837 and is recognized as one of the fastest growing cities in the State of Georgia in both size and population. As the largest city in Liberty County, it serves as the county seat and is home to more than 35,000 people. For more information, visit cityofhinesville.org.

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