

ESTHER'S TRUMPET



News and Views from Alabama's Black Belt

September 1, 2010

Fire!

The thought of our homes on fire is unsettling at best. Most of us in the Black Belt rely on volunteer fire departments. They risk their lives helping us, and they don't even get paid! A lot of folks can't figure out why people would do this. Volunteer fire fighters have to take extensive training. They have to drag out in the middle of the night, and a lot of fires happen when it's bitter cold outside. These brave women and men leave their families to perform a magnificent service. Not only do they not get paid, sometimes they don't even get respect. But they do it for us.

Volunteer fire fighters are also called to medical emergencies. Many of them have medical training. We rely on them much more than we know. They stand between life and death.

I know what these folks do. I am the Deputy Coroner of Lowndes County. Often, the Coroner and I are at the scene of these disasters, and we see first hand the bravery and skill with which these volunteer fire fighters perform their duties.

Support is hard to find. People do not realize how expensive the equipment is. One uniform costs \$1500. All the equipment, whether it is to protect the firefighter or put out the fire is outrageously expensive. There is little money for our volunteer fire departments, so they scramble around trying to raise money through fund raising activities, write grants and endlessly seek used equipment from other fire departments. It's a never-ending job, and it takes real commitment. It morphs into a group of people who trust each other, who have each other's back, and who are members of an elite group that saves lives.

In Lowndes, our fire departments get funding through a few federal dollars that are disbursed by the local county commission. These dollars do not begin to cover the costs. While grants may be available, they are hard to write, hard to find and hard to get. Most departments ask that the community pay dues, but even those dues are hard to bleed out of people.

Firefighters also have to deal with "armchair firefighters"....those folk who are there at the scene, giving advice. It's terribly annoying, and not helpful, but I have never seen a firefighter be ugly towards such a person. There's always complaints....they didn't get there fast enough, the dwelling could not be saved, etc. I think folks complain because they know so little about the time, commitment and cost.

Firefighters spend lots and lots of time on training. While you and I may be going out to dinner or attending some social function, their spare time is taken up with training. It's really a huge commitment to be a firefighter because it is a life commitment.

October 3 through 9 is National Fire Prevention Week. It's a great time to honor your local fire department with a donation, and a big "thank you". It's a good time to make sure you have paid your dues. It's a time to encourage those folks in your family and circle of friends to volunteer. Change the batteries on your smoke detector. Do a little "stop, drop and roll" exercises with your kids, and plan how to get out of the house if there is a fire.

As Deputy Coroner, I can tell you that prevention can keep me from coming to your house. I've seen these tragedies unfold, and those firefighters in your location stand between you and me. So give them a great big thank you!