Photos by Kristine Leffler

The list of donors is painted on the outside of the new fire-safety trailer in Chagrin Falls.

Chagrin Falls Assistant Fire Chief James Leffler (from left), Chief Frank Zugan and Lt. Ryan Shorr spearheaded the drive for the department's new fire-safety trailer. Mr. Shorr will use the trailer to provide real-life scenarios for teaching children and adults about fire safety.

Fire-safety trailer born from tragedy

By BARBARA CHRISTIAN

When Ryan Shorr was 6 years old, his best little buddy died in a fire. That event, he said, helped shape his life's work.

Today, Mr. Shorr, 34, is a lieutenant for the Chagrin Falls Fire Department and is the education specialist, a position he has held for 10 years.

"That's why I love to teach, I guess," he said of the sad childhood experience. "I am sure that's in there somewhere."

He estimated that he teaches 35 to 40 classes a year in various subjects relating to fire safety. His littlest students are preschoolers.

He laughed when he said the curriculum he developed ends at the high school level, because "they would probably just make fun of me."

The other reason, he said, is that, if the older students have lived in the school district long enough, they already have heard his message.

In addition, Mr. Shorr brings his fire-safety lessons to virtually all of the valley's organizations, such as Scout troops and baby-sitting clinics. Those attending the English Nanny and Governess School in Chagrin Falls also have benefited from the classes.

Now, children and adults can benefit even more from those classes with new up-close-and-personal, action-oriented lessons. Earlier this summer, the fire department received a new teaching aid in the form of a 34-foot, two-floor, $55,000 fire-safety trailer.

The trailer was designed by Mr. Shorr, who worked with the company that builds the pull-behind vehicles to make sure it was versatile and could help cover the curriculum.

Students who step inside the trailer will find a scaled-down version of a home, complete with a bedroom, kitchen and living room. Each area is equipped with simulated fire and smoke events.

For instance, the trailer's bedroom door can be heated to teach kids never to open a door that is hot, and how to survive in that room until firefighters arrive.

The rooms of the trailer can be filled with smoke as a lesson in how to find the way out through one of the most disorienting situations that can occur during a fire.

"When you put smoke in a room, it changes everything and we can teach how to react when all of a sudden, you are lost in that smoke," Mr. Shorr said.

Crawling under the smoke is one tactic, he said. Opening windows is another. To that end, the trailer is equipped with several kinds of windows designed to acquaint children with how to open different window styles.

There is also a microwave oven that can catch fire and a fireplace for lessons in proper safety habits around a fireplace.

There are other props that Mr. Shorr uses to simulate dangerous happenings and how to respond for the best chance of survival.

Fire Chief Frank Zugan said the department has looked forward to the arrival of the trailer, which he calls "a mini house on wheels and a great way for kids to learn safety skills."

The fire-safety trailer debuted earlier this year during the Salute to Orange celebration and will be on display Oct. 10 at the Chagrin Falls Fire Station during a safety forces open house, tours and fire-extinguisher refill event.

Although it is more efficient for students to come to the trailer, it can be pulled by another vehicle and taken to events such as fairs and other outdoor community programs.

The Chagrin Falls fire-safety trailer was purchased with proceeds from the four annual chili cook-off events the department hosts each year.

Other donors are: the Village of Chagrin Falls; the Chagrin Valley Jaycees; Giles Foundation; Chagrin Falls Police Department; the 135th Military Police Company, of the Ohio National Guard stationed at the Chagrin Falls Armory; and Brian Foster, son of firefighter Clayton Foster, who gave his birthday money toward the trailer purchase.

Mr. Zugan said that while the department's chili cook-off event has done its job, the event will be continued by the Jaycees as a fund-raiser.