

No, it wasn't an accident

No, it wasn't an accident Firefighting in Canada, August 2004

Firefighting in Canada, August 2004

Fire truck parking inside library is a handmade gift from Surrey Fire Department to encourage literacy and fire safety education

By Karin Mark

It's a kid magnet, with its glossy red paint, flashing lights, rooftop ladder and rows of neatly laid hose. As soon as children spot the fire truck, they're clamoring to climb aboard, sit in the cab and stand on the rear step.

And take a book from its shelves, of course.

The most popular bookshelf at Semiahmoo Library in Surrey, B.C. is a realistic fire truck replica that was custom-built and donated by the Surrey Fire Department.

Measuring 7.5 feet high, 11.5 feet long and 4.5 feet wide, the one-of-a-kind project was meticulously crafted out of wood and then painted to a high sheen.

"I think it's going to be a real focal point for us," said Beth Barlow, chief librarian for the Surrey Public Library system. "We're hoping it will really enhance kids learning about fire safety."

The truck was a housewarming present from the fire department to the library, which opened in September 2003 on what used to be the parking lot for one of Surrey's fire halls. The other part of the gift had been a \$250 donation to buy fire safety books when the library first opened.

"It was going to be our legacy, our gift to Semiahmoo Library," said Surrey Assistant Fire Chief Bud Livesey, the project coordinator. "The whole idea was to promote fire safety and promote reading. We just wanted kids to grab a book - a fire safety book - and read it."

The fire truck was unveiled by city, fire department and library officials on Apr. 3, 2004 after the individual components some weighing hundreds of pounds - were pieced together on site. Barricades went up several days in advance while the assembly took place. Only a handful of people were given access. "We wanted to keep it top secret," Livesey said. When the truck was revealed, the crowd was awe-struck by its realism. Master carpenter and Surrey firefighter Rick Olsen had spent many long hours over a three-month period designing and building the project. He painstakingly replicated the smallest details out of durable MDF (medium-density fibreboard) - right down to the 'Firestone' wording on the tires.

"Everything's made out of wood," said Olsen, 33. "The only thing that's real is the actual hose and the nozzle, the lights and the check plate." The fire truck replica was a first for Olsen, who makes custom furniture and cabinetry. The design work never stopped, as he was constantly confronted with the challenge of making the truck parts out of wood. It took 10 hours to hand-carve the tires, for example.

"There's depth to everything. Everything steps out and steps in. It gives it a 3D look," he said.

While the work was slow going, Olsen was energized by the encouragement of his superiors and the positive response from his children: Christie, age five at the time, and Nathan, age three. He even took his daughter's comments to heart when building the cab. Originally, it had a Freightliner front end.

"My five-year-old daughter comes in and I asked her, 'What do you think, Christie?' She said, 'Daddy, it looks like a garbage truck.' As my wife and kid are leaving the shop, I'm there prying off the front end."

He ended up using an American La France style front end - fittingly, the brand of trucks used by Surrey Fire Department.

With the eye of a father, Olsen took extra care to make the project as kid-proof as possible. He invited his children and nephews to play on it - and even tried it out with his dad - and then made improvements to the design and bracing.

He also installed 20 working lights, including rotators, strobes, LED lights and blinkers. They add to the truck's realism and the fun. "It sure has brought the kid out in me, that's for sure."

As pieces were completed, they were delivered to Hub Fire Engine Company in Abbotsford, B.C. for painting. Each piece had to be primed and sanded before it was painted. The company donated 100 hours of staff time for the job, while Horizon Paint provided three gallons of Dupont Imron red and silver automotive paint.

"It's got a mirror shine and there's no clear coat," noted Glenn Berger, a partner in Hub along with Harvey Goodwin and Jack Rempel.

Hub also chipped in the metal checker plate used for the cab floor and rear step. Given the project's themes - fire safety, kids and education - Berger said the company was happy to help.

"That's what you do for community," Berger said. "Surrey's always been good to us. We do a lot of work for them. You've got to give back; you can't always take. People that support you, you've got to support them."

The final step was the decaling, completed by Surrey firefighter Ryan Smith, 43. A graphic designer, Smith added the lettering, striping and other images to complete the truck's realistic look.

"Just to be able to be involved in something that was so unique, to have the opportunity, was great," Smith said. "I was proud to be part of it."

By the time it was finished in mid-March, 2004, the project weighed 1,200 pounds and would have cost more than \$50,000 to build, if most of the materials and labour hadn't been donated. Olsen, who had never seen it assembled, was almost as amazed as everyone else when he finally saw the completed product in the children's department at Semiahmoo Library.

"I was floored. There was a point where I just stood back and looked at it for 15 minutes," Olsen said. "I really appreciated the opportunity to do it, first of all, and secondly to be able to have full reign on it and full design control."

The project meant a lot to him, on many levels. "It's something I'm leaving behind to the kids, there's that part. As well, I have history in the fire service. Dad was one of the original Surrey firefighters. His badge number is 47," he said. "What it means to me is basically giving to the community from the fire service, from the Surrey firefighters, more so than from Rick Olsen. To be part of that and to be part of a second generation in the fire service is pretty huge."

Barlow said the library values its partnership with the fire department and police and tries to take advantage of the inherent educational opportunities.

The truck has certainly turned the library's approximately 35 fire safety books into hot property, according to its staff. "This is a great way to make young children aware of fire safety. They wanted to get that message across and they've done so very well," library manager Trish Miller said.

Miller said young children want to crawl all over the truck, older children like pretending to be firefighters and even adults appreciate the engineering feat it represents. Parents and children can often be seen reading together in the cab, which has a sloped dash perfect for holding books and can seat three adults or twice as many children.

The staff also takes full advantage of the flashing lights, flicking them on to kick off storytimes and library tours. "It's quite wonderful how it's part of the children's landscape and it's become part of the tools that we use and a way to share the books that we have," Miller said. With a chuckle, she added: "It certainly is a beacon. I'm just glad it doesn't have a siren on it."

As the builder and a dad, Olsen appreciates the fact that it doesn't have all the bells and whistles.

"We chose it to be a quiet place to read. I think that's fantastic. We need more kids to read, to pick the literacy up. Everybody's into the big computer age and everybody forgets about the book. Hopefully it will bring people back into the library and be part of the community."

The project is unique for both its workmanship and focus on literacy. While there is a fire truck at Clearbrook Library in Abbotsford, B.C., it was not handcrafted out of wood and is used for audio-visual presentations.

Livesey said the project's high quality makes it all the more effective in achieving the goal of encouraging children to learn about fire safety.

"It does what our public educators do - it teaches fire safety to kids," Livesey said. With this project, "we have an avenue to promote fire safety. We have the kids coming to us now as well as us going to them - and that's a big step forward."

To Surrey Fire Chief Len Garis, the project's success is "gratifying."

"We hoped that it would work and so far it looks like it's doing its job. It's developing some intrinsic interest in learning about fire," Garis said. "It kind of speaks to public education in the truest form. We have kids reading, and reading about fire safety and the fire service in general. It meets a bunch of objectives."

Published in August 2004 edition of Firefighting in Canada