

NEIGHBORS

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RICHMOND HEIGHTS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Students learn from simulated storm

■ A group of middle school students got a taste of emergency-management work dealing with the aftermath of a simulated storm at the Emergency Operations Center in Doral.

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As multicolored radar blobs on the monitors formed a familiar-looking vortex that was fast approaching Miami-Dade, emergency managers hit the phones.

"Mayor" Kyle Bird told an assistant that situation teams had 11 rescue volunteers, one school and 1,000 cots and blankets available, while "meteorologist" Lainie Velasquez reported that "feeder bands will hit us in six hours, and sustained 75-mile-an-hour winds will hit in 12 hours."

Teacher Suzanne Banas clapped her hands together. "Come on guys, it's a fire! You gotta get these 1,000 people out of there," she told the "situation teams" assembled inside the county's Emergency Operations Center in Doral.

Kyle and Lainie are part of a group of Richmond Heights Middle School eighth-graders who took over the county's Emergency Operations Center on Tuesday to manage a simulated Category 3 hurricane dubbed "Jamie."

The students got a small taste of the monumental tasks emergency managers have to carry out when storms rip up thousands of roofs, flood neighborhoods and toss uprooted trees into the streets.

It escaped no one's notice that Tuesday was the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Wilma's rampage.

The field trip was organized by Storm Zone, an emergency readiness program for middle and high schoolers sponsored by DHL Express, The Miami Herald and Hurricane Warning!, a storm education center located at the Disaster Survival House in Deerfield Beach.

"We just did two of these simulations, one in Broward and one in Palm Beach," said Bay Proby, of the public relations firm Proby and Associates and designer of the Storm Zone project, a spin-off of The Weather Channel's defunct severe weather education program, Project SafeSide. "The



PHOTOS BY CHARLOTTE SOUTHERN/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

PLAN IN ADVANCE: Dan Ludwig of DHL talks to Richmond Heights Middle School students as part of a disaster drill by Miami-Dade's Homeland Security office. The Storm Zone program teaches kids how the government prepares for natural disasters.



MINI-METEOROLOGIST: Lainie Velasquez and meteorologist Erik Salna announce the status of a mock hurricane.

kids love it."

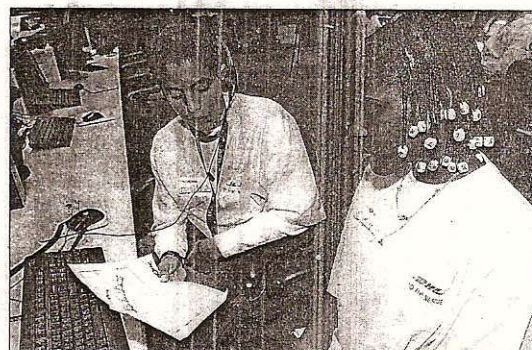
Banas and Proby gave the students three problems to solve during the simulation: a fire in a crowded shelter, severe overcrowding at a hospital and a high-rise full of elderly folks trapped on an islet by a downed bridge.

The students, divided into emergency support teams in categories such as housing, medical services and hazardous materials clean-up, made frantic phone calls to the mayors, Kyle and classmate James Warmington, to report available resources.

"This is a great opportunity for us, to get to know how the EOC does things in real life," said Joel George, 13, adding that Wilma sent a lot of water under his home's front door one year before.

Images of palm fronds and tree branches thrashing in the wind and of roiling waves slamming the coast flashed on the screens of several enormous TV sets suspended from the ceiling.

The group wrapped up the exercise by gathering in the media room, where Kyle and James delivered their post-



FIRST RESPONDERS: Eighth-graders Bryan Camacho and Giovannah Joseph learn the duties of Emergency Medical Services during Storm Zone.

storm updates to the "reporters."

They stood in front of the same flag-flanked blue wall, decorated with the county seal, with which most storm-savvy Miamians are all too familiar.

James began his report with the words, "my fellow Americans." His classmates cracked up.

"Were there any deaths reported?" asked Raequel Wilson, 14, playing a journalist. "Yes," Kyle responded, "but we don't have an exact figure

just yet."

A white board stood against the wall, still scribbled with a list of evacuee shelters prepared during the run-up to the mercifully mild Tropical Storm Ernesto.

Proby said he will continue to work with schools to offer middle- and high school students Storm Zone.

"I've done these in Texas and Louisiana as well as here, and every time the kids just want to know when they can come back because it's so much fun," he said.