

Mineola Junior Fire Department visits Hamburg Germany

Over the past two years, the Mineola Junior Fire Department has fostered a unique relationship with the Hamburg-Stellingen Junior Fire Department in Germany. It started with E-mails between Head Advisor Bill Gresalfi in Mineola and an advisor for the Hamburg Juniors. In the summer of 2007 the German Juniors traveled to Mineola for a visit to our village. In August of this year, it was Mineola's turn to travel to Germany for an unforgettable experience.

The Mineola Juniors had been working diligently to prepare for this historic trip. Trainings were regularly conducted to maintain their strong base of fire service knowledge. The Mineola community supported the effort by patronizing the annual Pasta Dinner where funds were raised to help offset some of the expenses. As the departure date approached, Uniforms were inspected to insure that Mineola's Juniors would properly represent our department.

In August 2008, Mineola's Junior firefighters were accompanied by their Fire Department Advisors as they arrived in Germany. Despite the 8 hour flight they were very excited to be welcomed by the firefighters and junior firefighters of Hamburg-Stellingen. Mineola's Juniors were able to reunite with the friends they met last summer and began catching up as the itinerary for their next nine days was briefly laid out. Sadly, The trip was absent one of the Mineola Fire Department's strongest supporters of the Junior program Ex-Chief Walter Langer. Many of the German Juniors had befriended Walter during their visit in 2007 and they wanted to pay their respects to his untimely passing. With church bells ringing, the members of Hamburg-Stellingen held a special memorial to Chief Langer.

The German hosts provided Mineola's Juniors with a well rounded German experience packed with History, Sight-seeing, Firematics and of course FUN. During the course of their stay, excursions included a visit to the Emigrant World BallinStadt, German version of tour Ellis Island, the Reichstag, the Berlin Wall memorial, and the checkpoint-Charlie that separated Berlin during the cold war. Most of the Juniors agreed that their favorite trip was the visit to Berlin, the German Capital on the Ice Train. Everyone loved the comfort of this high speed train. The Juniors were even a guest of the German parliament and visited the American Consulate in uniform.

The common thread that brought these two groups of youths together was their passion for firefighting. Initially Mineola Junior Firefighters were able to experience the different equipment and technology that the German Fire Service employs. A harbor tour was given on a German fire boat. The Hamburg Fire Department brought their 90 foot boom truck down to the firehouse where all the juniors had a chance to go up in it. Then the Partnership of these two groups brought new meaning to the concept of "cross-training". A day long training session was held with German Firefighters paid and volunteer plus a few other German junior fire departments. Here the Juniors' received a lesson in German Firefighting which has some variations and some unique tools. The juniors were given an opportunity to use some of the specialized German Equipment such as a robot pumper that moves along on tracks not wheels. This portion of the training was delivered in German but the language barrier was quickly overcome as the skills were put to work. The German hosts commented on how the Mineola Fire Department had trained their juniors very well and they were impressed with their Fire service knowledge.

As the Mineola contingent made their appearances throughout the historic sights of Germany they also took time for one of their favorite pastimes, shopping. At the end of each day The Juniors would reminisce on the day's activities. One night, each Mineola Junior was sent out to have dinner with a volunteer host family. Split up individually, they went to meet their German family for the night and had a good home cooked meal while experiencing the German culture. Following this meal, the next 3 days were spent on a camping trip off the North Sea island Sylt. The day's activities included swimming in the North Sea, playing soccer Football, volleyball and just hanging out with their German comrades.

On the final day with their German friends the Juniors' did some last minute shopping and then it was time to prepare for the farewell party. What a send-off it was!! Dignitaries, firefighters, and other guests, including the parents and families of our hosts, came together to support the Partnership. The Mineola officers made speeches and gave a present thanking them for their hospitality. Captain Bryan Strauss told everyone that his time in Germany was the first time that he was ever overseas and he certainly enjoyed his time in Germany. Lieutenant Tyler Wolf took everyone by surprise as he did his speech in German. The German president of the National German Fire Service congratulated the Mineola Junior Fire Department for making this historic trip to Germany. The president the organization representing all of the junior fire departments in Hamburg praised Mineola Fire Department's juniors for having the distinction of being the first from America to visit Hamburg in a cultural exchange. The highlight of the evening arrived as a special gift was unveiled. Ex-Chief and head Advisor Gary Mazur had commented on his interest in German automobiles, particularly the Mercedes Benz. In his honor, the Mineola Junior Fire department was presented with a full Mercedes Fire Truck Cab. This unit was originally designed for fire prevention tours but when the Germans heard about Gary's desire to own a Mercedes Benz, they wanted to make his dream a reality... After all the accolades it was time for dinner and a party given to us by our hosts.

The juniors remained with their German friends late to reminisce about the past ten days. As the trip came to a close, all agreed that the hard work that had fostered this partnership was well worth it.