

Stage collapse: Mock Disaster trains the first-responders of the future

May 11, 2015



The band plays their hits on a hot summer day, amid throngs of adoring fans.

And then, the unthinkable: a roar as the stage fails, giving way to screams and then, sickeningly, a silence. Cries and whimpers emerge, along with the drip of blood, the agony of broken bone, the paralysis of fear giving way to hysteria. The gray-faced dead lie beneath the wreckage of the stage, as the walking wounded stagger for help.



Katie Glasgow and Alex Endres perform before the start of the Mock Disaster



That was the premise for this year's Mock Environmental Disaster, which took place May 7 and involved more than 18 different departments across campus.

Now in its fourth year, the drill offers important training to students in a variety of disciplines. Scenarios are selected to involve around three dozen different injuries typical of a large-scale disaster, but in a way that does not alarm the rest of the campus, noted J. David Tinklepaugh, Clinical Coordinator for the Department of Emergency Medical Technology.

"It's a collaborative effort between most of the departments on campus," he said.

First-year Medical Assisting students played the victims

The event began with an actual musical performance by Katie Glasgow and Alex Endres – but don't worry, they weren't harmed in the performance. Instead, the mock stage was built from long tables and the victims were 34 first-year Medical Assisting students, whose dramatic injuries were created – cosmetically speaking – by Medical Assisting & Health Studies Assistant Professor Catherine Schuldt.

“I have a broken leg,” Rebecca Nash explained as she and fellow students Nicole Palmatier and Tatiana Zvdoffsky waited for the drill to begin. Tags on their wrist denoted their medical situation, giving first-responders clues as to treatment.

“Our blood pressure is pretty low,” said Nicole, glancing at her friends' tags.

"We're dying," Tatiana added.

Schuldt has a practiced hand when it comes to creating gruesome injuries with makeup, which is often done to train first-responders. Students enjoy the drill but they also learn essential skills, including everyone's role during a medical response effort, she said.

Outside, Criminal Justice and Emergency Services students were receiving last-minute instructions from Professor Kerry Kalick-Weber and began taping off the area.

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“Our job is that we have to keep people out of the disaster area. Your job is to make sure students who are not in suits do not come walking out here,” she told students, who wore a blue vest with the word “Police” on the back.

After a sound effect signaled the crash of the collapsing stage, an ambulance and fire truck rushed to the scene — as well as the College’s 22 paramedic students, all wearing crisp blue uniforms. Coordinating behind the scenes was second-year paramedic student Nathaniel Smith, the incident commander.

“As incident commander, I’m in charge of everyone. I get to assign people tasks and make sure they stay safe,” he explained before the drill. The mock disaster gives students a good opportunity to hone their skills and an edge over programs at other colleges, he added.

“You never know what can happen in the world,” he said.

Paramedic students set up triage areas and transported injured victims on gurneys. Firefighting students, wearing full gear, also responded.

Meanwhile, a group of bystanders filmed the drill on cell phones. Students in the Business Information Technology program, they were charged with creating and uploading material to social media. “Anyone can be a multi-media developer,” explained Denise Wells, Assistant Professor of Business Information Technology.

Others were tasked with working for the event company that put on the stage show, and will have to create documentation as if they were dealing with the insurer, Wells said.

On the other side of campus, SUNY Broome’s Hospitality Programs cooked up food for more than 350 people, playing the role of Red Cross volunteers responding to a large-scale disaster.

The drill continued inside, transforming Decker Health Sciences into a makeshift hospital. Decker 201 was turned into a morgue, where Dental Hygiene students used their skills to aid identification of the victims. Students queried sobbing “victims” on their identities and contact information, just as they would be in a hospital setting.

Along the way, some students had their injuries reassigned, allowing students in the Radiologic Technology and Physical Therapy Assistant programs to practice their skills.

“It’s an invaluable experience and one not easily reproduced,” Director of the Paramedic Program David Taggart said of the drill. “I hope we keep the ball rolling in future years.”

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