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Tammie Williams

photo by Chris Fritchie

Does Sponsorship Pay?

By Haley Shapley

ON THE TOWN'S STREETS, cars whiz by, bicyclists pedal down the road and pedestrians stroll along the sidewalks. A light counts down the time it's safe to use the crosswalk. People walk in and out of buildings like the Hayes Rue Chapel and Centennial Medical Center. It sounds like Frisco. It looks like Frisco. But is it Frisco? Close, but not quite.

It's Frisco Fire Safety Town, a miniature of the city built adjacent to the Central Fire Station on Gary Burns Drive. Two dozen buildings are on the site, constructed to five-eighths of their actual size. The paved streets are complete with working traffic lights, a railroad crossing and a toll booth. A 9,000 square foot educational building on the property holds two classrooms, a fire truck donated by E-One and a wall of equipment, plus a replica of a large kitchen and child's bedroom, all used to teach kids about different aspects of safety.

The project was no small undertaking. In total, Safety Town's cost is nearing

\$5 million, and there's still work to be done. While the city has taken on some of the expenses, a good portion of the contributions have come from the sponsorship of local businesses. Thus far, these sponsors have given between \$2 and \$3 million, and Mack Borchardt, Frisco's fire chief, thinks that number will rise now that Safety Town is operational and has moved beyond the conceptual.

ONE OF A KIND

Part of what makes Safety Town so special is the realism of the cityscape. The houses look exactly like houses in Frisco, just in a miniature version. "With each individual sponsor, they built buildings that were consistent with what actually represents their business," Chief Borchardt says.

Although Safety Town would exist without sponsors, the businesses and individuals who have contributed have pushed it to the groundbreaking level. As of now, there is nothing else similar in the United States. "The sponsors

worked with us to carry [our] vision much farther than we would have been able to with the funds we had, and they helped us enhance the programs we have," Chief Borchardt says.

Steve Kaufman from Kaufman Company Inc. is responsible for much of the concrete work in Safety Town, including the sidewalks and many of the house foundations. Chief Borchardt contacted him in the early stages of the project, and Mr. Kaufman later helped recruit homebuilders as sponsors.

WHY DO BUSINESSES BECOME SPONSORS?

Sponsorship is big business these days, and it isn't uncommon to see buildings or events named after corporations like Pizza Hut Park or the Dr Pepper Dallas Cup. The benefits are numerous — sponsorship can create brand awareness and loyalty, enhance the profile of a business or just create goodwill among potential consumers. Many business owners believe giving something back

to the community in which they live and work is a part of being a good corporate citizen.

There are about 35 founding sponsors of Safety Town, whose contributions range in value from \$25,000 to \$250,000. Additionally, there are a number of businesses that have given on a smaller scale. They are all listed on a wall inside the educational center, and some sponsors, particularly those who don't have a building with their name on it, have streets in the town named in their honor. They are also listed in a special Frisco Fire Safety Town edition of *The Dallas Morning News* that is available in newspaper boxes on-site.

Early on, the Fire Department made sure they had the support of the schools, as the students in the Frisco Independent School District (FISD) are the primary targets for the program. Official trips to Safety Town began on January 8th, and in just that first month, 1,800 students visited. It was important to Chief Borchardt to get the school district on board in the beginning stages, as it helped lend credibility to the project. "We presented this program to FISD, [who is] a sponsor. When we presented it to them, we needed them to be enthusiastic; we wanted to get the kids here during the school year," Chief Borchardt says.

It wasn't too tough to persuade the school district that this would be a great idea. "I think this just extends learning and finds another way to make a connection with the kids," says Shana Wortham, communications director for FISD. "Our young people are impressionable and easily able to learn, then they take that learning to their family."

Others weren't tough to persuade either. When Paul Vinyard heard about Safety Town, he thought it sounded like just the type of thing he'd want to be involved in and he jokingly calls Chief Borchardt "one heck of a salesman." The Babe's Chicken owner currently has six restaurants in North Texas and plans to build the next one in Frisco.

His building in Safety Town may be getting just as many raves as the real restaurant's fried chicken. With a colorful exterior, including bright pink and green trim, the building has been a big hit with the students coming through.



Paul & Mary Beth Vinyard

photo by Chris Fritchie

According to Stacey Reed, a first-grade teacher at Pink Elementary whose class toured the townscape, "The girls were sure to take their picture in front of the Babe's Chicken to be 'hip chicks.'"

Mr. Vinyard says the number one reason he decided to become a sponsor was "the feeling that you're giving back to the community, that you're not just taking money or profits from the community and running off with them, [but instead] you're giving something back to the people who support you." The restaurant replica of Babe's Chicken cost upwards of \$45,000 to construct, but for Mr. Vinyard, it was well worth it. "Safety Town should save lives," he says. "I don't think there's any doubt that it

will."

Plus, there's the benefit of attaching a positive image to one's name. "Somewhere down the line, there will be people who will be more loyal to you because you do this type of thing," Mr. Vinyard says.

Other businesses were also quick to recognize the value of the project. Leigh Roberts of Leigh Glendenning Real Estate Services has a degree in education and thought the idea was a great one from the start. Like Mr. Vinyard, she says the appeal of sponsorship was to help kids in the area. "I don't think it hurts for name recognition, perhaps," says Ms. Roberts, but she stresses that the biggest benefit was the ability to give

back to the community. “I think that it is an absolutely wonderful concept to instill safety in the elementary school children and have them carry it home to their parents.”

Teaching kids safety was also the main factor for Tammie Williams, owner of Apple Creek Private Preschool. “We’re a preschool, so although most children are too young to participate in field trips, most of our children will be going into Frisco public schools,” she says. “We see it as an opportunity for our business to contribute to the future learning of our students.” Ms. Williams’ sponsorship went toward painting a mural in the entryway that shows Frisco’s landscape.

“We’re hoping to further the education [of the kids] after they leave our facility,” Ms. Williams says. “It’s meaningful for us to be a part of enhancing the Frisco community when we’re a school in this community.”

THE EXTRA MILE

For Mr. Kaufman, the motivation was “nothing more than the satisfaction of being able to help out,” but he acknowledges that some — such as those with their names on the buildings — may benefit more from branding than others. “There’ll be a lot of people going through there who will recognize the names of the people involved,” he says. “There are a number of people who will get a lot of recognition from it.”

With something like Safety Town, though, it’s clear that no one is in it solely for the profit of their business. “The sponsors spent two and sometimes three or four times more than it would take to build a house to our standards in Safety Town,” Chief Borchardt says.

“I think, ‘yes, they’re businesspeople and there’s some benefit in advertising,’

but I think the extras that every one of them did, every one went above and beyond what we asked them to do by a large amount,” Chief Borchardt says. “I think they did that because they saw

to parks and churches. Because they have no sales team and don’t advertise, but instead competitively bid on projects, sponsorship has a minimal financial benefit to their business. “It’s about protecting children, helping them learn

safety,” says Mr. Vilhauer, who’s been a resident of Frisco for more than 20 years. “Safety is such a part of our business that we teach every day.”

COMMUNITY EFFORT

Not everyone can plunk down \$25,000 to construct a house or pave a sidewalk so, to contribute on a smaller scale, Safety Town recently started a campaign for marketing child-size Jeeps and bicycles, which are used to help teach kids about motor vehicle and pedestrian safety. After learning about these topics in the classroom, students hit the streets of Safety Town for a hands-on demonstration of staying safe while walking or riding around Frisco. For a cost of \$2,795 (motorized vehicle) or \$1,495 (bicycle), businesses can get their name and logo placed on the sponsored item for a three-year period. Safety Town promises that the sponsored items will be rotated, so each vehicle or bicycle is in use and visible on a regular basis.



Steve Kaufman

photo by Chris Fritchie

the value of the program and did all they could to make it as successful as it could be.”

Going above and beyond is like second nature to Rodman Companies, a site development construction company owned by Rodney Vilhauer and Barry Rich. For Safety Town, they teamed up with Mario Sinacola & Sons to do much of the dirt work, excavation, utilities setup and paving. In all, Rodman completed about \$250,000 worth of work at the site. Over the years, they have sponsored everything from soccer teams and shows

“There’s so many young people [here] and this community has always supported its young people,” Ms. Wortham says. “I think [Borchardt] was able to take that support and articulate what it was going to mean to the community and what it was going to look like. He and his staff are very visionary and had a passion for bringing this to Frisco.”

And his sponsors support him all the way.

Haley Shapley is a freelance writer living in Euless.