

It's Not the Real Thing, But Aurora's Center for Simulation Comes Close



STATE-OF-THE-ART TRAINING CENTER STAYS BUSY WITH LOCAL, STATE & NATIONAL EMERGENCY DRILLS

By Tanya Ishikawa

Spent bullet cartridges spread across the carpet toward a patch of dried vomit in the Emergency Medical Services office at the Community College of Aurora. Leftovers from a disaster drill, the spent rounds and puke (the former real and the latter plastic) are graphic reminders of the danger and mess faced by emergency responders.

This office, where simulation coordinator Pony Anderson works, is a living museum filled with artifacts and tools of the trade such as thick three-ring binders stuffed with detailed plans, and large aerial photos marked up with maps and information. This is the heart of the Center for Simulation—a community asset that provides hands-on training to local, state and national agencies, preparing them with critical skills for rescue operations of all sizes.

“It’s just an invaluable facility, as far as the resources they have for teaching,” says John Putt of Operational Consulting Group, who helps design and lead mass-casualty training events at the college.

“Adult learners do by doing. That’s the value of the Community College of Aurora; they really focus in on how to create the most value for that learning. The philosophy of our teaching, and even of our paramedic career training, is to get enough repetition to retain the skills. The fact that CCA provides that invaluable repetition makes them leaders in EMS education.”

Putt is also a paramedic at North Washington Fire Protection District in Adams County, and has 30-plus years of related experience. He has been a paramedic field instructor at Denver General Hospital and a member of the Alpine Rescue Team in Evergreen. He credits Anderson, a former firefighter, paramedic and adjunct instructor, for her vision in helping pioneer the Center for Simulation and expand the emergency-training programming at CCA. She spearheaded the design of three unique simulation studios and related facilities for student and professional training exercises on the college’s Lowry campus. Now, she spends her days coordinating drills for simulated car accidents, health emergencies, industrial catastrophes, weather disasters and terrorist incidents. These über-realistic drills provide dramatic, transformative experiences for students and



Opposite: The disaster drills at Community College of Aurora involve professional first responders as well as students training for such careers. The Disaster Management Institute (above, left) is the central command room where operations are organized—for emergency drills and even real disasters. Exercises take place on movie-like indoor sets or in fields and vacant buildings on campus.

professionals, who include local fire and police, military and airport personnel, and various state and federal agents.

STINKY BILL FILLS THE BILL

The Center for Simulation is most widely known for its outdoor disaster drills, like Operation Mountain Guardian (or OMG, as it was called), which took two years to plan, closed 2.65 miles of roads around the center, and mobilized 3,000 people and more than 100 agencies in September 2011. Training events are coordinated with an alphabet soup of government, medical and educational institutions, including NORAD, DIA, FEMA, TSA, DOD, and local SWAT and

HazMat teams, as well as Buckley Air Force Base and the Department of Homeland Security. But most drills are relatively small in scale, taking place in open fields and vacant buildings on campus. They range from midnight exercises for the military to car-accident scenarios for EMS students.

Anderson enthusiastically pulls together each operation by organizing all the resources and logistics. For example, she's formed a partnership with a local junkyard to get wreckable cars, and advised a Marine commander on obtaining approval to land helicopters on campus and replacing college property if it gets blown up. She even works with an Army researcher nicknamed Stinky Bill, who developed spray-

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The neighborhood of Aunt Em's Café—a set in the Center for Simulation studios—looks calm and inviting until “disaster” strikes. Whether it's a car crash (opposite, below) or some other emergency, the victims, blood and general mayhem are orchestrated by a team of staff and students.

on smells like burnt flesh to use on actors in the drills. (Inside scoop for future drill volunteers: These spray-on odors are not always easy to get rid of, even with a good shower.)

Although the outside of the center gets a lot of attention, the inside is where the real community assets lie. The building is uniquely furnished with a complete DNA lab, a fully equipped medicine and emergency-supplies room, and the Disaster Management Institute—a central command room where all operations can be organized for emergency drills and even real disasters. A state-of-the-art facility with multiple satellite cable feeds and the latest in communications gear, the entire space is controlled with touch screens that work like giant iPads.

Three studios offer several different environments where trainees can get hands-on experience with situations dreamed up by the

Training scenarios involve single or multiple “victims” hanging out of cars or upside down from railings, lying in bathtubs, stranded on attic rafters, trapped at the bottom of a manhole, or in any other possible position.

center staff and orchestrated by a team of staff and students. Like Hollywood sets with the realism required of a high-budget movie, a house, a bar, a cafe sidewalk, a factory, an alleyway, and an underground sewer-type space offer the same challenges that would be found in actual emergency situations. Yet cameras are watching from every angle, and an instructor in a control room quietly observes the scene, ready to halt any exercise that gets too dangerous.

SPARKING ALL THE SENSES

Within the studios, EMT and paramedic trainees may face locked doors, debris of all kinds, gale-force winds, extremely low or high temperatures, steam, smoke, foul smells, water, sparking electrical panels, and any number of environmental conditions including ear-piercing sirens and some 6,000 other sounds. The training scenarios last between 10 and 45 minutes.

They involve single or multiple victims—either actors or high-tech dummies that react to medicines, defibrillators and other stimuli—lying in bathtubs, hanging upside down from railings, stranded on attic rafters, trapped at the bottom of a manhole, or in any other possible position. Also thrown into the mix as appropriate are helpful or hindering bystanders such as “family members” or “reporters,” all

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CCA's Pony Anderson (left) relaxes with Douglas County Commissioner Steve Board and writer Tanya Ishikawa after an exercise on a biting windy January day. Anderson, a former medic and firefighter, coordinates and helped pioneer the Center for Simulation.

portrayed by students from other college programs like the film school or English department.

"We have to create that buy-in. The way we do it is seeing to all the senses," Anderson explains. "The acting students are dramatic; they're good at it. When you walk into the studios, people are screaming and crying. They put you in the moment. You can't avoid being pulled into it, and the buy-in has been created.

"What if a 320-pound man is passed out up on a balcony?" she continues, with her characteristic excitement. "You can talk about it in the classroom all you want, but you don't know what it's really like until you're hauling your heinie up that ladder and trying to lift him up. Standing outside a locked door and wondering what to do next—there's nothing like that for developing critical thinking. What are you going to do if you can't even get past a low-tech house door? Someone has to take control of the situation. Team-building and leadership: They're things you can't teach in a classroom." ♦


Tanya Ishikawa is a professional writer and editor who covers a wide range of topics, from political issues to business and culture. She is also an independent filmmaker involved with Denver's filmmaking community and public-access TV station.

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