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## A Scorching New Way to Celebrate

A group of firefighters creates a safe and adventurous way for kids to save the day--and blow out the candles.

By Kevin Manahan | September 10, 2007

**Who:** Chris Gantz, 26, and Ed Howard, 30  
**What:** The FireZone, an entertainment facility that specializes in firefighter-themed parties and activities  
**Where:** Glenview, Illinois

Ask kids what they want to be when they grow up and a firefighter is likely to be one of their top choices. Chris Gantz had this in mind when he and fellow firefighters started a fire truck rental business for parties and events in the Chicago area several years ago. Now they help young, aspiring rescuers live out their dreams at The FireZone, an interactive firehouse and activity center that gives kids a realistic look at the world of firefighting.



At The FireZone, kids get to try on authentic fire gear.

While running the fire truck rental service, Gantz began thinking that a permanent events facility might be a better business model. From a financial perspective, the costs of fuel and insurance and the time it took to hold events were drawbacks. Gantz also realized that rather than having a horde of kids running around their own houses, parents needed a place that could accommodate their parties. Funded by capital contributions from Gantz, his partner, Ed Howard, and a third financial contributor, The

FireZone was ready to open its doors by October 2006.

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Instead of enjoying the usual ball pits and arcade games, kids can put on authentic fire gear and take part in team-building firefighting activities. "It's a very interactive, very imaginative facility where we give kids just a little taste of what firefighting is like," Gantz says. A fire extinguisher prop house, for example, lets kids put out simulated fires using real extinguishers, while others can put their courage to the test by saving the firehouse dummy from a smoked-up kids bedroom using a real fire hose--without the water, of

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course. There's also a ladder simulator, a virtual reality game and working fire engines for kids to explore.

Aside from entertaining children, The FireZone also aims to make it easier for parents to throw birthday parties for their kids. From party supplies to food and drinks, the facility takes the burden of planning off the parents. "Our goal is to have a parent be able to book a date and then show up the day of the event with their child and a camera and enjoy the event just as much as their child is," Gantz says.



A fake fire scenario is just one of the activities children can take part in.

Running The FireZone hasn't been without its share of obstacles. The staff is made up of 20 local firefighters, both men and women, who help run the business as a side operation. Firefighting remains their first priority, although The FireZone is rapidly become a full-time venture. And employing experienced firefighters instead of local high school kids has been more costly.

Yet the results of their hard work are impressive. After less than one year of operation, The FireZone expects to turn a profit thanks to its exponential growth this year. "We did not expect to see the growth that we are experiencing right away," Gantz says. Ready to build on that success, The FireZone plans to expand to a second facility in Naperville, a southwestern suburb of Chicago. Gantz says they also are working with consultants to franchise the company and hope to have the details settled within the next few months.

Gantz, in part, credits The FireZone's success to firefighting's mostly positive image, a sentiment evident in kids' reactions. "Anytime you can get a high five from a kid when they have a good birthday or they have a good experience, you can't trade that for anything," Gantz says. In addition to creating a business, The FireZone team has found a way to put their values as firefighters to a different use. "Our whole goal is helping people and helping our community," Gantz says. "Even though this is a business, we still try to maintain that attitude."

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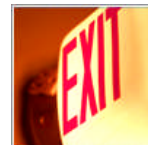
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