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## Kids learn fire safety with 'Ready Freddie'

By David Sattler

Freddie is ready. So is Georgi, his boxer. And Pam and Sam. And they want you to be ready, too.

Ready Freddie is the creation of Glenwood resident Earl Hicks Jr., who discovered something when looking for books that would help children prepare for emergencies. There weren't any. Or at least any "that were fun and interesting," he said.

So the West Virginia native, who works in emergency preparedness for the federal government as the director of security in the Inspector General's Office of the Department of Justice, turned his complaint into action - he began writing a book, which became a series, about Ready Freddie and his dog, Georgi.

In the first book of the series - and the only one that has been published so far - Ready Freddie learns about fire safety.

"I wanted kids to know how to react in an emergency when an adult wasn't around," Hicks said. "Instead of panicking, I wanted them to know what to do."

Hicks has written nine more books, covering such calamities as floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes and power failures. Although he and his wife, Lisa, have two young children, Hicks finds plenty of quiet time to write.

"I'm on a bus 1 1/2 hours to and from work every day," he said.

Ready Freddie wasn't his first idea, or even his first shot at writing for money. After graduating from what was Towson State University - now Towson University - with a degree in mass communications, Hicks landed a job "as a sportswriter for a Harford County newspaper." He loved writing about sports, but there was one drawback. "The pay was \$100 a week."

Seeking a larger paycheck he landed a job with a public relations firm in Rockville, but when the company laid him off "I chose job security" and wound up with the Department of Justice, where he still is today.

It paid the bills, but it didn't give him much opportunity to write, and when he and his wife, Lisa, adopted two boys from Guatemala, he began thinking about writing a children's book. Lisa "thought about doing a series based on our dog about manners and etiquette," but as Hicks reviewed emergency preparedness plans at work, an idea began to form: the idea of Ready Freddie, "a name that just came to me."

### Getting the word out

The book has been somewhat of an odyssey. Unable to interest a publisher, Hicks decided to publish the book himself. The publisher he chose, BookSurge Publishing, offered illustration services that were out of his price range, so he searched the Internet to find someone.

"I found some folks in Argentina, really talented, really easy to work with," he said. The only issue was the occasional hiccup in communication, since the illustra-



STAFF PHOTO BY MAISIE CROW

### Getting kids ready Earl Hicks of Glenwood, who recently published his first book, "Ready Freddie," sits in his home office.

tors spoke only Spanish and Hicks has "forgotten all the Spanish I ever knew."

Once, the author recalled, "I asked them to draw Ready Freddie crawling out of a smoke-filled room" to illustrate how to escape from a fire. "They sent me an illustration of him crawling out of a room that was filled with adults all sitting around and smoking."

Once the communication and production glitches were solved, Hicks figured marketing would come easily. "I was naïve," he said, thinking that local fire departments would want to partner with him to get the books out in the community, and local libraries and community groups would welcome a visit and reading by a local author.

Instead, so far his few public appearances have been far afield, such as a recent reading at Deerfield Run Elementary School in Laurel. Hicks is "contacting everyone I can think of" to try to get more publicity and, hopefully, find a publisher willing to print the remainder of the Ready Freddie series "once I have a track record with this first one."

Make that two track records. One unintended benefit of using Argentinean illustrators is that they were willing to translate the book into Spanish, so Hicks now has two versions of "Ready Freddie: Getting Ready for Fires." Freddie, in fact, looks a little Latino, a look that Hicks said "was deliberate," because he wanted the series "to have a multi-cultural feel."

In 24 pages, Freddie, Georgi and their friends cover the basics of fire safety, from not playing with matches or candles (Georgi burns her ear) to escaping out a window if a fire blocks a door (again, demonstrated by Georgi).

The books come with a payoff: a certificate to join Freddie's Ready Patrol. Hicks' Web site, readyfreddie.net, even offers clothing, bags, hats, coffee mugs and other merchandise with the Ready Freddie logo, for patrol members who want to go all out.

Now, all Hicks needs is more sales. He's sold almost 100 copies, "so I've exhausted the friends and family market." The book is listed on Amazon.com and Target.com, as well as Hicks' own Web site and the publisher's, booksurge.com.

Because books are digitally printed on demand "when you order from Amazon the book is printed and shipped in four days" - there is no warehouse filled with Ready Freddie books, so Hicks has neither the expense nor the liability of paying for and storing cases of books. Conceivably, he could produce Ready Freddie books in other languages as well, though he currently has no plans to go beyond English and Spanish.

Hicks holds out no illusions that Ready Freddie will make him rich, or even replace his current job. But if he can help keep kids safe, "I'd be happy."

And if those kids joined the Ready Freddie Patrol, that would be good, too.