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Brewster Park Muster Brings in 37 Explorer Teams

By KATHERINE ROSENBERG/Staff Writer: Daily Press

APPLE VALLEY --While most teenagers and many adults don't know what they want to be when they "grow up," Brewster Park was filled Saturday afternoon with hundreds of youngsters who share a common goal: They want to become firefighters.

Saturday's 10th annual "Explorer Muster" was one of three annual events during which the Explorers — students between the ages of 14 and 21 who are interested in learning more about the firefighting profession — get to come together and display the skills they've learned through a bit of friendly competition.

Gathering at the muster were 37 teams of Explorers from 19 departments in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. The competition featured four events: the make and break, bucket brigade, water ball and a mystery event.

"Ideally, when they turn 18, they go into the fire service. That's our whole intent, to get them prepared for a career as a firefighter," Art Bishop, Division Chief of the Apple Valley Fire Protection District said.

So driven are the members of the Inland Empire Fire Explorers Association that they often spend several hours a week at their local firehouses studying and riding along with firefighters to learn more. They dedicate their weekends to

learning the skills necessary for fighting fires and for events like those held in Saturday's competition.

Toni and Ron Chaffee of Victorville spent their day at the event, watching their 18-year-old son, Kyle, a chief in his group, display the skills he's acquired.

"He's been with the (Phelan station) Explorers since he was 14, and they actually just hired him as a paid-call firefighter," Toni Chaffee said of her son.

"Right now he's doing his EMT at Victor Valley College and then he'll start the fire academy there in August," Toni Chaffee said. She said her son's route to becoming a firefighter is a common path.

"It's like they've been going to college for this since they were 14. A lot of these kids become firefighters because with all the training and skills they have through Explorers, it's already second nature to them," she said.

Bishop said that nearly 2,000 Explorers have gone through the program in its 14-year existence and that some of the earlier Explorers are now working as firefighters in the area.

"Kids that stay with the program have an extremely good chance to become firefighters, and those are the real rewards, seeing them go through and work their way up the ranks," Bishop said.