

Crew turns classroom into police station

By PETER KELLEY
Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — Just after noon on Thursday, the little portable classroom near LaVenture Middle School that will become the North 26th Street Neighborhood Police Station stood nearly empty.

But a half-hour later the place is alive with hammering, sawing and chatter punctuated with cries of "Hey Gromus!"

They'll be gone again just after 1 p.m.

Every day of the week, a crew of up to nine Mount Vernon High School students rushes out to the tiny structure — about 900 square feet — to work on turning it into a police station.

They are overseen by Al Gromus, high-school drafting and construction teacher, apparently known to students only as Gromus. He hovers and advises as students measure and drill, cut and hammer. He is part s, part dad and, perhaps, part

"Hey Gromus," says one sweat-shirted student, holding copper tubing. "This doesn't stay together."

"No that'll work," he says. "See this piece? When you tighten it down it'll make a good seal. So tighten it."

"With a wrench?"

"Yeah." And the call goes out for a wrench, which another student brings.

Seven students are working Thursday. They are installing electrical wires in the building, finishing windows and getting a start on plumbing.

Student Brendan Rooney, 17, says he likes the work. It's a good way of earning outside a classroom. But he has no plans to do construction for a living.



Matt Wallis / Skagit Valley Herald
Mount Vernon High School seniors Jeffrey Schwab (left) and David Dundin straighten up a door at the new North 26th Street Neighborhood Police Station. The two are among nine students converting the classroom to a station for a school project.

"Oh no. I'm gonna be a game warden," he says.

Standing nearby is Greg Booth, neighborhood resource officer for the Mount Vernon police. He will work in the station when it is finished, in late May or early June. The station will be open Wednesday through Sunday, from noon until early evening.

Booth won't be alone, though. Two family violence prevention advocates from Skagit Rape Relief

— Elizabeth Ibáñez and Courtney Kadlec — will offer help to neighborhood families on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

The station is a joint project among police, Skagit Rape Relief and the Skagit County Human Services Department. The portable classroom — and the use of the land behind LaVenture Middle School — came courtesy of the Mount Vernon School District.

Mount Vernon Police Lt. Chris

Cammock has been a driving force behind the station. He said most of the work is paid for by a \$13,000 federal grant. The project also has received donations of materials and cash from several local businesses and service clubs.

Back in the portable, student Jeff Schwab finishes framing along a window.

"Gromus! This came out perfect!" Schwab says.

Gromus agrees and goes off to help another student.

Schwab and Rooney are among nine students who asked Gromus if they could help with this project in the off-hour other teachers use to grade papers.

The others are Jesse Ammons, David Dundin, Chris Loomis, Will Ruhland, Robert Sepulveda, Michael Van Pelt and Dustin Kanske.

Booth says the station will have a light pole outside and a security system when it's finished. There has been a bit of vandalism to the unfinished station. Over the weekend someone broke two windows. But that was only the one incident.

"Still, that's better than we had anticipated," Booth says.

Cammock said after all the planning, the project is shaping up well.

"It's going right on schedule and in line with what we forecasted, and in some cases beyond," he said.

Meanwhile, inside, Gromus' name is called again, as it is virtually every minute in his drafting lab at school.

"Hey Gromus, is it OK that it's like that?" one asks.

That's fine, the teacher says; they are all doing a fine job.

And they will be back today, and Monday, and so on, until it is finished.

Booth stands back and watches the action.

"For a few minutes out of the day, it's crazy in here," he says, smiling.