

## National Guard visits Hopatcong students

By BRUCE A. SCRUTON

[bscruton@njherald.com](mailto:bscruton@njherald.com)



Photo by Daniel Freel/New Jersey Herald

**Sergeant Carrie Henderson, left, shows Tulsa Trail Elementary School students Caitlin Menber, center, and Shawn Gesregan, right, the inside of a U.S. Army Humvee Monday at the Hopatcong High School football field following a presentation about the dangers of smoking. The event kicked off the school's "Violence Awareness and Red Ribbon" celebrations into violence and drug awareness. Members of the National Guard's Drug Demand Reduction program spoke to the children about the hazards of all kinds of drugs, including tobacco and alcohol.**

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HOPATCONG -- As it came flying overhead, the 300 second- and third-graders gathered in the football bleachers let out a cheer.

But the soaring turkey vulture, soon joined by another, was not what they had really come to see.

The Kiowa helicopter arrived a couple of minutes later, first in a high-speed pass over the field, then gently touching down astride the 50-yard line, facing the bleachers.

The two officers from the New Jersey National Guard stepped from the helicopter. As they were later to explain to the students from Tulsa Trail Elementary School, all U.S. Army aircraft carry the name of a Native American tribe and the Kiowa helicopter is the smallest of them all.

The landing and assembly Monday kicked off the school's "Violence Awareness and Red Ribbon" celebrations into violence and drug awareness.

As part of its mission, the National Guard works closely with federal, state and local police agencies in drug interdiction programs. Even when on routine Guard training, the pilots, Warrant Officers Vic Balint and Michael Chaiko said they are on the lookout for

growing marijuana patches. They said Guard pilots this year have found about 30 such fields.

For an hour, the children, broken into three groups, made the rounds of the helicopter and two other drug awareness stations set by members of the Guard's Drug Demand Reduction program, hearing from soldiers about the problems with all kinds of drugs, including tobacco and alcohol.

At one station, Sgt. Carrie Henderson, whose presentation included a look at a U.S. Army Humvee, asked the children about the various chemicals, such as arsenic, found in tobacco smoke.

When she mentioned tar and pointed down to the asphalt surface the children were standing on, a long "eewww" went up from the assembled youngsters.

At the helicopter, pilots got the usual questions about how to fly a helicopter, what the various

parts protruding from the aircraft do, and drew their own chorus of "ooohs," when Chaiko pushed on the rudder pedals in the cockpit and Balint pointed out how the rotors at the tail tilted.

Lisa Schuffenhauer, the school counselor who helped coordinate the event, said this was the first time in about a decade the school district had seen a visit from a helicopter. "It's a great learning experience for the kids," she said.

School principal Jeff Nesnay said: "You don't remember much of grade school, maybe a teacher's name. But it's the events like the day the helicopter landed that stays with you and those are the lessons we hope they learn."

As the program ended, Chaiko and Balint took their seats in the Kiowa and the children sat around the perimeter of the field. The chopper lifted off the field, the pilots waved and the kids waved back.

With a much noisier exit than entrance, the helicopter took off, made one last high speed pass over the field and headed home.