

Ashland salutes Guanajuato's bomberos

by Chris Chambers Ashland Fire & Rescue
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Ashland Fire & Rescue logo.jpg

Like tendrils reaching from our community, Ashland Fire & Rescue has a connection with our sister city fire department in Guanajuato, Mexico.

I don't know when it started exactly, except there's a really old Jeep down there that used to be one of ours. It probably still runs, which is one of the amazing things about the ingenuity of Mexican repair shops. Since that Jeep made its way down south, we've followed up with multiple ambulances and two full-size fire engines. One was donated in 2007 and the other in 2015. Used fire engines just don't hold their value

here compared to the amount of use and extended life they experience in Guanajuato. ... Both are still in service down there.

While I was there this past week, an Ashland ambulance staffed with Guanajuato bomberos, or firefighters, helped a young man during a diabetic episode that left him in seizures on the street. This happened right in front of several people from Ashland, and they watched as the old Ashland No. 8832 swooped in to save the day, which is to say that the incredibly dedicated firefighter/medics did all the work, but we can accept a small karmic credit for providing the vehicle.

The amazing thing about the Heroico Cuerpo de Bomberos Voluntarios of Guanajuato is not the length of their name, but that they are, in fact, nearly all volunteers. They have day jobs like engineer, doctor, veterinarian, lawyer, student ... and they still work their shifts at the fire department because it's their duty to help others. I don't know of a similar-size city in the U.S. with a volunteer fire department. And they provide an incredible array of programs beyond fire and medical response that includes dive rescue, wildfire suppression, confined space rescue, rope rescue, hazardous materials and public education. Fire codes? Maybe not so much. They had just extinguished a 70-car junkyard fire before we arrived, and that's nasty, toxic work. The narrow streets of Guanajuato are particularly challenging. As we drove with the veterinarian bombero down an alley that almost scraped both side mirrors of a small sedan, I asked him how they get to fires in places like that. He said they run, carrying hoses and gear, for what might be a quarter-mile or more in some cases. That's dedication.

Last week, we celebrated not only our sister-city 50th anniversary, but also the 50th anniversary of their fire department. They have been keeping this amazing group together for that long, and they have over 30 new recruits in their yearlong academy right now. It's every weekend, all year, just for the honor to serve for many more years as a volunteer who will routinely be in harm's way ... for no pay. That spirit translates to their warm hospitality, welcoming embraces and sharing of their culture. Last week they dedicated a plaque on the side of their building to our 50 years of

amistad, or friendship. It went right next to the plaque from the 30th anniversary celebration (40th was missing). We might be able to send down big trucks and ambulances, but what they offer in lessons in humanity, gratitude and friendship are difficult to measure and impossible to outdo.

Firefighters in any country and setting are special people for the life they've chosen, and especially volunteer firefighters of any nationality, including those in our valley. But in Guanajuato, the bomberos are a special kind of volunteer. And like here, women serve as well, and though we've adopted the gender neutral "firefighter" for the outdated "fireman," I didn't hear "bombero" used yet, but maybe that's something we can work on. It's an honor to continue our relationship for these many years, and here's to many more. ¡Viva los bomberos y las bomberas!

Chris Chambers is the Ashland Fire & Rescue Forest Division chief. The Alarm Box, a column with local public safety information, appears triweekly in the Tidings.