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JEREMY BROADFIELD/St. Albert Gazette

STEPPING UP – Victor Fernandez (left) talks with Premier Ed Stelmach in front of a fire truck donated by Dow Chemical to the Canadian Aid for Fire Services Abroad. Fernandez, a local firefighter, has been working on co-ordinating surplus fire trucks and equipment donations for the last 20 years.

Fire trucks headed south

BY SCOTT HAYES

Staff Writer

For approximately the last 20 years, a St. Albert man has been fighting fires both here and abroad.

Victor Fernandez is the president of Canadian Aid for Fire Services Abroad (CAFSA), a humanitarian organization he describes as a recycling operation. CAFSA takes retired fire trucks here and gifts them, along with protective firefighting equipment and gear to smaller communities in the Caribbean and in Central and South American countries where they are desperately needed.

On Thursday Fernandez received official acknowledgement for his efforts by receiving personal appearances from two notable supporters: Premier Ed Stelmach and MLA Ken Allred. They all got together on Taché Street to pose for a picture with two engines donated by Dow Chemical in Fort Saskatchewan. In a few months these vehicles will be on their way to Chillàn in Chile.

As he explained it, the whole project is a simple matter of filling a gap of availability versus demand.

"It needs to be done," he said, calling it a matter of conscience and something that is good for society and the world. "It makes sense."

He continued on to say that fires in still developing areas are exponentially tough to battle because of various factors like construction materials, population density and the relative inability of fire departments to handle the threats. Fernandez saw a basic necessity of safety and a simple solution albeit thousands of miles away.

"We pick up the stuff, send it to the drycleaner ... inspect it and it's ready to be shipped to a country where there's people who can't afford to go into a fire like that. Right now there are firefighters in Central and South America who are going into fires with their street clothes because they can't afford a jacket or a helmet or gloves. That's what we're trying to change. The bottom line is we are helping our brothers."

The CAFSA team has made much headway over the years, finding delisted fire trucks from various communities, businesses and organizations throughout Alberta and other provinces. The net took a long time to spread out but it is clearly catching more attention nowadays.

Fernandez needs as much support for his mission as possible and encourages people to consider helping out, even if it means volunteering for just an hour. For more information, visit www.cafsa.net.

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