

CAFSA president anxious to get to Chile

by **GLENN COOK**

Saint City News

This is no ordinary trip home for Victor Fernandez.

Fernandez, a member of St. Albert Fire Services and the president of Canadian Aid for Fire Services Abroad, left Thursday for CAFSA's latest mission, delivering a 20-foot container full of firefighting supplies and a pair of fire trucks to the city of Chillán, Chile.

It will be an especially emotional trip for Fernandez, his first time back to his home country after an 8.8-magnitude earthquake rocked the area on Feb. 27.

"I have mixed feelings about it," Fernandez said, noting that the mission was delayed for about a month because of the earthquake. "I'm trying to prepare myself mentally,

because I've seen pictures of the destruction. But I don't think I can prepare until I really get there. I think I'm prepared mentally, and then I'm going to change my mind when I actually see it."

Lyall Hutchinson, another member of St. Albert Fire Services who has been on just about every CAFSA mission, said he is not expecting a run-of-the-mill trip, either.

"We always go down to help fire departments prepare for emergencies; theirs already happened," he said. "So it's that next level for us. I'm a little apprehensive, because it's hard for me to fathom the destruction and the devastation."

Fernandez and his colleagues to Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala and other cities in Chile since 2006. Each time, they take donations of new or gently used firefighting equipment to fire departments in these municipalities.

The equipment may not be up to stringent Canadian standards, but it's still much better than what is available in many of these countries, where sometimes blazes are battled wearing nothing more than sweaters and sneakers.

Fernandez said preparing for another mission never gets old.

"There are parts that are very complicated and confusing, but then everything clears up, and it's exciting," he said. "We're helping a lot of people, and on the other end, over there, they're very excited. They can't wait for the 14th to arrive so we're there."

But before all the excitement comes, Fernandez and his crew have a lot of miles to log — they must first fly to Toronto, then to the capital of Chile of Santiago, a total of almost 24 hours.

"It's a very boring flight," Fernandez said with a laugh, "and Air Canada doesn't put the best plane over there. That was an old plane, the last time we were there. I think that's the hardest part for me, is to fly. ... But I manage. I'm small, so I fit pretty good in the seat."

The two trucks headed to Chillán were donated by Dow Chemical in Fort Saskatchewan. Ed van Velden, emergency services and security technical leader for Dow,

is heading down to Chile with CAFSA, and said, while there are a lot of unknowns on his first mission, there is a common thread between the Canadian delegates and their hosts.

"They're firefighters, so we're going to have that; there will be an affinity there," he said. "I've worked with lots of volunteers in the past, so I suspect they'll be very welcoming and eager to learn — even more so now in light of [the earthquake]."

Also joining Fernandez is his 10-year-old daughter Balbina, who spearheaded a drive at Ronald Harvey Elementary School to collect school supplies for students in the village of Quinchamali, near Chillán.

CAFSA is gaining quite a reputation for the work they do — so much so that provincial fire commissioner Trent West is coming along on the trip to Chillán to experience it himself.

West said it was "Victor's enthusiasm" that made him want to see CAFSA's work first-hand.

"This is my first opportunity, so I was able to grasp that chance," he said.

Fernandez said that West's request to tag along came as a surprise, but a pleasant one.

"It's good exposure for CAFSA; it's a great opportunity," he said. "I'm very thankful for him to come, and he's going to see first-hand what we do and how the people welcome us over there."

Fernandez's reputation is growing at home, too, as he recently received an Integrity Award from the Saint City Rotary club in St. Albert on April 21.

"It was a total surprise to me ... I was shocked, and my wife and kids



PHOTO SUPPLIED

St. Albert Fire Services member and CAFSA president Victor Fernandez says he's not sure what to expect when he travels on his latest mission to his home country of Chile after it was rocked by a massive earthquake in February.

were very proud," he said.

The cash prize from the Integrity Award, plus a donation from the club, brings their contribution to the Chillán mission to more than \$2,000.

The Saint City club has supported several CAFSA missions, and Fernandez said he's very grateful for their continued support.

"It's nice to know there's somebody there supporting you, not just financially, [but saying], 'We're there for you,'" he said. "It reassures you that you're doing something right."

However, all the support in the world may not be enough to prepare Fernandez for what awaits him in Chile.

"Every mission we take, I take it like we're attacking a fire, and everybody has their own mission there — you've got this job, this job and everything, and we'll concentrate and do something," he said. "I wish I could tell you how I'm going to react. I've prepared myself to react this way, but it's a high-emotion trip."

The CAFSA contingent is scheduled to be back in Canada on Sunday, May 23.

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» **Victor Fernandez,**
CAFSA president