

CAFSA leaves 'em speechless

by **GLENN COOK**
Saint City News

Victor Fernandez loves leaving people speechless.

Fernandez, a member of St. Albert Fire Services and the president of Canadian Aid for Fire Services Abroad, recently returned from the latest CAFSA mission, a return trip to San Pablo, Guatemala, to deliver a tanker truck and a firetruck to the firefighting brigade there.

He said that the recipients of the trucks were so grateful for the gift that they were a little flabbergasted.

"They didn't know what to say; they were overwhelmed," he said.

"I think they still think it's a dream," he added. "I talked to them [recently], and they still think they're going to wake up and there's not going to be a firetruck there."

CAFSA takes both new and slightly used firefighting equipment donated from across Canada to fire departments in developing nations, where some firefighters battle blazes with only buckets of water and no safety equipment. They also train the firefighters on how to use the new equipment properly.

Past missions have taken them to places like Ecuador, Chile and Colombia.

This was their second trip to San Pablo, as CAFSA delivered

firefighting equipment there in 2007.

"It is gratifying coming back to a place that didn't have anything," Fernandez said. "Now they have all this equipment. It's your baby, and it's growing."

In fact, he added, the city had applied to the Guatemalan government for similar equipment in 2006, and had been told they would have to wait at least 15 to 20 years.

The tanker was donated by the Drayton Valley Fire Department, while the firetruck was donated by the Lac Ste. Anne County Fire Department. Both now proudly sport Canadian flags and the logos of CAFSA and Rotary Clubs who chipped in to help with shipping costs in their new home.

However, bureaucratic red tape prevented them from delivering their long-awaited gifts earlier and in better shape.

"[The fire] truck, it sat in the port of Quetzal — which is like their Vancouver — for six months," he said. "The sea water and air did some damage to the front pump, so they had to go do work on it."

But once CAFSA contacted a local group, the First Lady's Secretary for Community Services, the process was expedited tremendously.

"They solved the problem in 48 hours," Fernandez said.

There are also some



PHOTO COURTESY VICTOR FERNANDEZ

A member of the San Pablo fire department works the radio on the new pumper truck donated to the Guatemalan city by CAFSA.

challenges moving such large trucks through the narrow streets in San Pablo.

"We had an issue here with the tanker," Fernandez said, pointing to a photo of the tanker negotiating a corner during a parade through the city. "We really had to go back and forth, because it's too big. If you've got a car parked [on either side of the street], it would barely make it."

But the front pump on the firetruck is a big benefit for just that reason, he added, as well as dealing with forest fires.

Aside from fighting fires, the tanker truck will also perform the very important duty of delivering water to remote areas around San Pablo.

"The guys weren't too sure at the beginning, but that's what it was meant to be," Fernandez said. "When we talked to the Rotary Clubs and everybody, [we said,] 'It's not going to

stay in the fire hall sitting doing nothing. It's going to go deliver water.' They needed to be shown that it could be done this way, and it can be done."

The trucks have even helped spark renewed interest in the fire department, with a cadet corps being set up for young kids to learn the trade and stay out of trouble.

"It gives them a place to go, instead of being in the corner, doing nothing and getting into trouble," Fernandez said.

Even though his feet just landed back on Canadian soil, Fernandez is already planning his next CAFSA mission for early next year, when he hopes to take a container of firefighter equipment and two firetrucks donated by Dow Chemical in Fort Saskatchewan to the city of Chillan, Chile.

For more information on CAFSA, check out their website at <http://www.cafsa.net>.