

Chileans welcome CAFSA in wake of quake

by **GLENN COOK**

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Wherever Victor Fernandez goes, things remind him of home.

Fernandez, a member of St. Albert Fire Services, is the president of Canadian Aid for Fire Services Abroad, and recently returned from CAFSA's latest mission to deliver firefighting supplies and two fire trucks to the city of Chillán, Chile, where they were met with lots of enthusiasm.

"It's like watching my seven-year-old son with a new Lego truck," he said. "It was exactly the same, the same smile. That is so gratifying."

As always, the reception that the CAFSA crew got was very warm, but Fernandez also said the firefighters in Chillán were very eager to learn.

"There were a couple of guys who phoned in sick to their regular jobs to be in the training," he said with a laugh. "They were very receptive; they were open to new training."

And there was plenty of new equipment to train on. Before CAFSA arrived, the Chillán fire department had only seven breathing apparatuses spread across eight stations, and only two of those were operational. But Fernandez added 59 more to that total.

They were also eager to learn about the trucks donated by Dow Chemical in Fort Saskatchewan, and were particularly impressed by the monitor on top of one, which gushes out water at more than 19,500 litres per minute.

"They thought they were in a movie,"

Fernandez said.

"We create that energy, and everyone wants to be a part of that," he added.

The CAFSA crew this time around included Fernandez, fellow St. Albert Fire Services member Lyall Hutchinson, Dow Chemical emergency services and security technical leader Edward van Delden and Alberta fire commissioner Trent West.

"Trent said to me that it was 10 intense days, but he felt 20 years younger," Fernandez said. "You feel younger; you're filled with energy. You feel like you've done something. And that's what it's all about."

In fact, there was an emotional moment when one of the firefighters tried on the only jacket donated by Dow that would fit him to find van Delden's initials scrawled inside from 10 years earlier.

"Those two connected, and it brought tears to Ed's eyes," said Fernandez, noting that this particular Chilean firefighter, Ricardo Maureira, gained a measure of fame after rescuing a young child from a burning building in September 2009. "The connection was unbelievable. And this man [Maureira] is going to the grave with that jacket."

In the days leading up to the mission, Fernandez was feeling anxious about the trip and seeing how his home country was coping with the aftermath of an 8.8-magnitude earthquake that struck in late February.

But he said he was able to keep it together and admired the Chileans' resolve.

"I was surprised; I thought I held it together pretty good," he said. "In the beginning, I thought I was going to

react with mixed feelings, but I was calm knowing that they were OK."

While Fernandez and his crew were in Chile, two more aftershocks hit — one 5.8-magnitude quake and another measuring 6.5.

"The 5.8, it was like somebody shook you pretty quick. We looked at each other and said, 'What was that?' It was like when the house moves when the trains go by," he said.

"The 6.5, at 5:30 [p.m.], we were at the hospital; they were showing us the damage at the hospital, which was substantial. We were in the damaged building when the 6.5 hit. We started laughing; we looked at each other and [laughed nervously]. One was waiting for the other one to run, but nobody did."

It was because of the threat of those aftershocks that Fernandez's 10-year-old daughter Balbina did not accompany him to Chillán, even though she and her classmates and Ronald Harvey Elementary School had worked hard to raise school supplies for a school in the nearby village of Quinchamali, as well as raise money to buy wood-burning stoves for several classrooms.

Fernandez said that they thought they raised enough money to buy eight stoves, but because of unforeseen extra expenses, they could only buy two.

But he could still see that those two stoves made a big difference.

"It was cold that day, when we visited, but you could see and feel the warmth when we went into that classroom," he said.

Fernandez hasn't mapped out exactly where the next CAFSA mission will take



PHOTO COURTESY VICTOR FERNANDEZ

CAFSA president Victor Fernandez accepts a certificate from a young Chilean fire cadet during a ceremony in the city of Chillán, the site of the organization's latest mission.

him, but it's hard for him to ignore the need that is still present in Chile.

"There are a couple of cities that were hit by the tsunami in Chile, and they've got nothing," he said. "But we have to meet and we have to see where we go next. We'd like to go to another country, but since Chile was hit by this earthquake and tsunami, we might go back to the same place twice, because the need is so great."