

Another successful sister city intercambio

Guest - Non ADN Writer:

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On behalf of the Aspen Volunteer Fire Department, I would like to thank a number of individuals and businesses for their in-kind help and financial assistance during our first Aspen/Bariloche sister city fire fighter intercambio (exchange). Before I list those names, I would like to share what an incredible experience it was.

In February of 2008, Aspen firefighter Blair Elliot, my wife Anne and I journeyed to Bariloche, Argentina, to visit the volunteer firefighters of our South American Sister City. We were treated royally and promised to return the kindness as soon as possible. During our stay we toured their five cuartels (stations) and learned a great deal about the talent and character of Bariloche volunteer firefighters. We also were able to discover what it was that we could do to help them with their firefighting efforts.

Upon returning to Aspen, we immediately set about the process of finding what equipment would be most useful to them. Our department was able to pull together a large number of SCBAs (self-contained breathing apparatus), a number of AEDs (automatic emergency defibrillators) and other assorted gear. We also started planning for the visit — a not so easy task at times! As an added plus, while here, the five visiting bomberos (firefighters) were able to train with the equipment they were to receive, and soon became confident masters of that equipment. And during the process, they became fast friends and brothers with the volunteers of Aspen.

For those who are sister city veterans, I am sure you have a positive idea of what an exchange means to you. But for Aspen firefighters, we were a bit unsure as to what might be in store. Certainly there would be language issues, perhaps some cultural difficulties and possibly some philosophical differences. All of our anxieties soon dissipated as our training officers and line firefighters discovered the incredible talent and dedication these men bring to their volunteer commitments. These men trained with incredible intensity and desire, making our efforts to work with them both productive and memorable. Language barriers became momentary glitches and the cultural differences were soon adopted — we even began hugging and offering the quick cheek-kiss, common in Argentine greetings. By the way, women are a huge part of the volunteer fire service in Bariloche. As a matter of fact, two of the chiefs (jeffas) are women, and great ones I might add. Sadly, none could make the trip.

The training provided by the Aspen firefighters was very much appreciated by the bomberos, and we know the equipment will be a boon to their cuartels. But what did we receive from the intercambio? As we were closing our exchange at the Elks Club, the look in everyone's eyes told the story. Firefighters worldwide are an incredible brotherhood. No matter where we travel around the globe we know, if needed, there is always assistance available at any fire station. Our exchange was an opportunity to share

that sense of unity that comes with being of the same mind, the same commitment and the same value structure. As we ate our final meal together, talked and shared memories only recently created, the sense of sadness that comes with parting was evident. But also present was a sense of having done something truly good and right — something only those who participated could truly appreciate. That is the true worth of our exchange, what made the time spent with our Bariloche Bombero Brothers so wonderful!

On a more practical note, as part of our mutual training opportunities, we were able to evaluate how we perform the many skills required of the modern volunteer firefighter. Our conversations comparing how they do things with how we do them fostered many questions and ideas that we will be visiting in the near future. We found many strengths and discovered some areas that will receive a renewed training focus in the future. Our new Argentine friends were often like kids in a candy store viewing our state of the art equipment and apparatus, and they left us knowing how fortunate we are to have the unfailing local support we enjoy as volunteer firefighters of the Aspen community.

A huge thanks to the following who made the visit an unbelievable success: Smiddy Limo for getting us here and back; Craig Melville and the Mountain Chalet staff; translators Cameron Wentzel, Francesca McPherson, Alejandro Rojas and Francisca Triulza; the nice price breaks or free food provided by the Butcher's Block, La Cantina, Double Dog Brew Pub, Brunelleschi's Dome Pizza, the Woody Creek Tavern, Elevation, the Elks Club, Paradise Bakery, City Market and Clarks Market, Tom and Carol Kurt for the wonderful dinner at their Ashcroft cabin, and a toast to Mr. Rob Pew and Rosie Wettstein of Main Street Spirits for the great vino; Aspen Sports and D&E for bikes; Aspen Skiing Co. for exciting gondola rides for guys not used to those heights; Bob Harris of Blazing Paddles for scaring the shorts off the bomberos on the raging Roaring Fork River; Jimmy's for being the official, non-official evening hang out for the boys; sister city helpers Griff Smith, Helen Klanderud, Pat Fallin and his honor, Mayor Mick Ireland, whose Spanish is awful, but he gave it an honorable effort; a huge thanks to the city of Aspen, as it once again welcomed sister city visitors and made them feel as if this was as much their home as ours; and anyone that was forgotten (though secretly you didn't want the publicity anyway).

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