

Author: Hugh McElvey

It was a jubilant moment. A gleaming red FMC Fire Engine was being delivered to the Bomberos, or Fire Fighters, from San Fernando, Mexico. The culmination of nearly 2 years of work between the Rotary Clubs of Crystal River, Crystal River King's Bay Florida and San Fernando and Matamoros, Tamaulipas, was about to reach its conclusion.

The project was conceived in 2003 by Roger and Linda Proffer, as they were donating a truck to the Evangelistic School in San Fernando Mexico. Roger and his friend Brian O'Connell delivered the truck to Benjamin and Ramona Ojeda, the School's Director and his wife. The school teaches young people, ages 13 - 25, life skills, English, computer skills, social skills and evangelistic methods including basic Bible beliefs.

In working with the Ojedas, Benjamin and Ramona, to help them obtain the land for a future new school, Roger inquired about the possibility of the local Rotary Club participating in their project. This discussion led them to the Rotary Club in San Fernando when Mr. Ojeda took Roger to meet with local Rotary Club members. After a few inquiries Roger was introduced to Reynaldo Hinososa Ochoa, a club member, who arranged for a special club meeting to discuss the opportunities to help with the future school. The Club President, Dr. Miguel Angel Calvillo Herrera, offered a solution to Mr. Ojedas difficulties. The involvement meant so much that just by putting their Rotary Club behind the project, the Ojedas obtained a 99 year lease on the land needed for the school. Without Rotary Club involvement it would have taken much longer to obtain the required property.

At the Tuesday night meeting Roger asked the San Fernando Rotary Club members if there were any possible needs that might be worked on as a combined international service project. The club members agreed that there might be and on Wednesday morning escorted Roger and Linda to the Municipal Building. The community service buildings were in the planning stages and the tour involved a review of their firefighting and ambulance equipment.

The city representatives were proud of their aging ambulance but sadly admitted that they had no life supporting supplies or oxygen; not even a single Band-Aid or bandage. The review of their firefighting equipment was equally distressing; the 1958 Hawes engine had one hose and a few pieces of bunker gear. Bunker gear is the essential, lifesaving gear every fire fighter wears to survive while performing their dangerous duty.

At this time Roger and Linda could make no promises but told the city officials and Rotary Club members that they would find a way to help them one day. Having only recently joined the King's Bay Rotary Club, Roger and Crystal River Club member Linda knew that they wanted to help these people that had touched them so deeply with their honesty and sincerity. They had enjoyed their visit to San Fernando, a sprawling town in the Northeastern Mexican state of Tamaulipas.

Fast forward two years when the Proffers have expanded their roles as members of Rotary; Linda is the International Chair for the Crystal River Club and Roger is President Elect of the King's Bay Club. Roger is also a Crystal River City Councilman. The project began to come together when the City of Crystal River

declared an aging fire engine as surplus. As they say, the lights went on in Roger's head and the dots became connected. The Proffers immediately began to organize the combined efforts of the two Crystal River Rotary Clubs to purchase and outfit the surplus engine prior to giving it to the San Fernando Rotary Club.

These plans nearly fell apart when the Crystal River City Manager withdrew the surplus engine from the bid process. At that point, Roger turned to a retired Marine Patrol Captain and volunteer Fire Chief, David La Grua. David has a vested interest and distinct knowledge base of fire engines. As past president of the Citrus County Fire Chiefs Association and a member of the Delmingo Society, a club that restores and collects antique fire engines, he has detailed knowledge of many engines. After learning the details of the project, David became interested in helping the Proffers locate a suitable engine and outfit it appropriately.

It didn't take long before Roger and David found a suitable engine recently taken out of service in Groveland, Florida. The engine was out of service but not yet surplus at that point. Roger contacted the Groveland City Manager who had the engine fast-tracked for surplus in short order. Roger was told to watch eBay and bid on it. Roger stayed with it during the bidding process and submitted the winning bid, \$3400, just prior to the 12:18 bid closure. The King's Bay Club had provided a \$2500 original bid. The Proffers had decided to pay any amount required over the \$2500 club commitment out of pocket and contribute it on their own.

After winning the bid Roger and David brought the engine back to Crystal River with the help of Dan Johnson of Johnson Motor Cars. Dan provided a dealer tag which permitted it to be driven on public highways. Dan's wife, Sandy, is a long time member of Crystal River and now King's Bay Rotary Clubs. This connection was vitally important since obtaining an owner's tag would have been difficult. After David had made a thorough survey of the vehicle it was determined that the engine pump was fully functional but new hoses were required. It was also discovered that the engine needed two tires which were supplied by Harvey Smith's Truck Tire of Crystal River, Harvey also being a member of the Crystal River Rotary Club.

At this point the Crystal River Club became very interested in also adopting this as their International Service Project and agreed to offset the additional \$900 the Proffers had paid. This level of support continued to grow. Their original international service goal was a water project to be done in conjunction with a club in Uganda. When no Ugandan Rotary partners could be located, this project was put on hold and the San Fernando; fire engine project became their focus for international service.

With a partnership between both of the Crystal River clubs and the San Fernando / Matamoros Clubs solidifying, David and Roger proceeded to obtain new fire hoses. These hoses were donated by many organizations including the South Levy Fire Department, Chassahowitska Fire Department, Indian Rocks Beach Fire Department and St. Martin's Marsh and Aquatic Preserve.

C.L. Callaway, a member of the King's Bay Club and manager of the Crystal River Office of Withlacoochee Electric Power Coop had his shop to go through the fire engine's mechanicals. C.L. is a devoted Rotarian and supports many club and community activities. In short order, the engine was adequately equipped,

operational and the process of getting the fire engine to the appropriate hands in Mexico began in earnest.

Roger wrote a letter of donation to the San Fernando Club and asked that they obtain the exchange paperwork required by the government of Mexico. This process is a rather lengthy and involved but progressed smoothly with the help of email. A firm exchange date was set for mid-March and the location was designated at that time. An additional truck driver was identified and the plans were set in motion.

My part of this International Project began when I volunteered to driver the chase truck. This was necessary in the event we ran into problems during the drive to Mexico and also for transport back to Florida. I work for Seven Rivers Regional Medical Center in Crystal River as the Operations Director for the Clinical Laboratory and Respiratory Therapy Departments. I am also the Membership Chairman for the King's Bay Club. After approaching the hospital's Chief Executive Officer, Joyce Brancato, RN, MBA, she agreed to support this Rotary function by donating my salary for the exchange and by providing a cash donation for fuel. With everyone on board, Roger, David and I left in the early morning hours of March 15th for Brownsville, Texas; a trip of some 1286 miles.

The initial portion of the exchange trip was a driving odyssey to Harlingen, Texas via I-10, U.S.59 and U.S. 77. Limiting our speed to 60 mph to maximize fuel economy and minimize wear on the fire engine, we easily made the trip in two uneventful days. The worst problem we encountered was a deflated left inner tire that was replaced, at no charge by Strouhal Tire Co., Victoria, Texas. The tire repair was donated after they found out we were contributing the engine to San Fernando. For this portion of the trip, Kings Bay Rotarian Chris Gregoriou of All Prestige Automotive Inc. loaned us a Dealer plate.

We arrived in Harlingen, deep in Southern Texas, in the early evening hours Wednesday. I then to met the most remarkable family. Benjamin and Ramona Ojeda, their son Elias, daughter Trina, son-in-law Jeff and granddaughter Nicole accompanied us to a true Mexican meal at a local restaurant. Everyone was excited about the bright red engine and what it would mean to the people of San Fernando. After a pleasant evening we all adjourned for some rest before the exchange scheduled on Thursday morning in Brownsville.

We were up bright and early the next morning. The day dawned clear, crisp and cool; a welcomed picture perfect day after the rainy trip. Our greeting group consisted of Roger, David, Benjamin and Roberto, a close friend of Benjamin's and Pastor of the Sandero de la Cruz Church in San Fernando.

We didn't have long to wait until the San Fernando group consisting of Dr. Miguel Angel Calvillo Herrera, Jose Juan Moreno Glez, Club Secretary, Ing. Reynaldo Hinojosa Ochoa Club Treasurer and Ing. Abel Ramirez, of the San Fernando Fire Department, arrived for the exchange. It was easy for them to find us; a red fire engine sticks out sharply in a shopping center parking lot.

Handshakes and greetings all around became the order of the day. Once the preliminaries were over a round of pictures was taken as the club representatives exchanged flags and pins. This was an important moment for both clubs. Following the photo shoot David got down to explaining the engine

operation and driving characteristics to Ing. Abel and our new Mexican friends. David really impressed everyone with his knowledge and ability to communicate. Teaching limited English speaking professionals was interesting to watch and it was amazing how rapidly they caught on to David's demonstrations. The eager participation of these individuals was most encouraging and it let us know that our venture was well worth the effort.

The remainder of that day was one of cultural enlightenment. I had never been out of the United States and had no firsthand knowledge of the lives led by those below the Rio Grande River. The first thing we did upon arriving in San Fernando was to have a meal with Roberto and his wife. In his capacity as a Pastor, Roberto works with Benjamin to improve the evangelistic school. At this time the students actually stay in the buildings owned by the Dominguez family though they are limited in capacity to serve 20 students at a time. The girls stay in the upper story of the Dominguez home while the boys stay in another dwelling close by. The educational sessions run for 4 months.

After our meal of beans, rice, cactus relish and tamales we visited the site of the future school being built through the Ojedas efforts. The concrete and block building is walled in and the roof will be installed with the help of a missionary group from Orlando, Florida, in the near future. The students come from all over Mexico and take their new skills back to teach others in their communities. The state grants a 99 year lease for this type building project. The outfitting of this school would be a great international project for any Rotary Club looking for a worthy activity. The San Fernando Club is available to help bring the materials in and ensure that the supplies are being used properly.

After looking over the school site we met up with Ing. Abel at the San Fernando Municipal Building for a tour of the city. During the tour we visited the remains of the fire engine that had previously been used. It was caught in a brush fire months ago and destroyed. As we were viewing the remains of this fire engine it became obvious that our contribution was going to be a blessing to this community. The many members of the fire and police force of San Fernando talked to us and explained the difficulties of providing adequate protection for 115,000 people given the challenges of their equipment.

David talked extensively with the fire fighters, or Bomberos, about firefighting techniques while Roger and Dr. Herrera signed all the final paperwork required to satisfy the Mexican Government. With that done, our mission to San Fernando was officially concluded. However, our trip continued the next day with a shopping trip to Progreso, a free-trade center just across the Mexican border. You can shop, at very reasonable prices, for Mexican goods and bring them back duty free with the exception of liquor and tobacco products. It was enjoyable and we were lucky enough to witness a parade of brightly costumed children and young people promenade down main the street. This impromptu shopping trip was a fun way to end this satisfying project and bring home great souvenirs for our families.

For those who, like me, have never been to Mexico I would like to say that all the people we met were friendly and welcoming. Obtaining a permit to cross the frontier into real Mexico takes a birth certificate and driver's license. In order to drive a vehicle in Mexico you will need to post a bond that will be nullified when you leave within the time frame specified for your visit. The basic permit is good for 7 days. It is recommended that you buy specific Mexican Insurance that is available at the border.

While in Mexico you will note that the housing and living conditions are significantly different than most American's but the people seem well nourished, happy and socially adept. It is a unique culture that I hope to have the opportunity to observe closer in coming trips.

On the long drive home we talked of future potential projects. The fire fighters of San Fernando also serve as rescue personnel but their only working ambulance was lost to an accident recently. The list of potential projects to help this community would then include: furnishing the school being built by the Ojedas, a second refurbished fire engine, a water tanker to compliment the fire engine, bunker gear, an ambulance, emergency supplies of any type, a jaws-of-life machine and fire/rescue educational materials. All this could be done as a joint venture with the San Fernando Rotary Club.

We would like to thank the following groups for support with labor, funding or materials: King's Bay and Crystal River Rotary, San Fernando Rotary, Matamoras Rotary, Entrenamiento De Fe Escuela de Evangelismo, Sandero de la Cruz Church, Chassahowitzka Fire Department, South Levy Fire Department, Indian Rocks Beach Fire Department, Withlacoochee Electric, Seven Rivers Regional Medical Center, Harvey Smith Tires, St. Martins Marsh and Aquatic Center, All Prestige Automotive Inc., Strouhal Tire Company, Johnson KIA and Cardenas Motors, Inc..

Author's Note:

Hugh McElvey is a 19 year resident of Crystal River, Florida. Hugh is the Clinical Laboratory and Respiratory Therapy Department Director for Seven Rivers Regional Medical Center and serves as Membership Chair of the King's Bay Club.