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Gig Harbor retired firefighter Phil Michelsen supervises children in the town of Ayutla, Mexico, who ignored the rain Saturday and came out to play with the lights and sirens of the community's new fire engine. The donated truck was pulled into the town square for Mexican Independence Day.



PHOTOS BY DREW PERINE/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Air Force Master Sgt. Scott Terra guides a donated firetruck off a massive C-17 Globemaster after it and pallets of cargo were flown Friday from McChord Air Force Base to Guadalajara, Mexico. The truck made it to the town of Ayutla, but the other donated items were stuck at the airport by customs red tape.



Gig Harbor restaurant owner Jose Lopez, center, talks logistics with Ayutla, Mexico, officials Jose Luis Pelayo, left, and Juan Ignacio Moreno over breakfast Friday. At right is Jeff Anderson, one of the South Sound volunteers who flew down to lend a hand with delivery of a firetruck and other donated items.

## **MISSION TO MEXICO: 'It will save many lives'**

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Published: September 21st, 2008 01:15 AM | Updated: September 21st, 2008 06:37 AM

AYUTLA, Mexico – Six exhausted South Sound residents hoisted glasses of tequila in this Central Mexican village Saturday, congratulating themselves on completing an unusual humanitarian mission that's taken 21/2 years to see through.

The group had just pulled into town with a bright yellow fire engine, nearly 40 feet long and weighing 27,540 pounds, and bearing a Washington state license plate on its back bumper.

Group members presented the firetruck to the little town, which has no fire department and where residents typically fight fires with buckets of water.

"Who would have thought a couple of guys over margaritas could fly a fire engine into a foreign country?" said Ed Troyer, the Pierce County sheriff's spokesman who helped organize the effort.

Troyer traded bear hugs and back slaps with Jose Lopez, the Gig Harbor restaurant owner who inspired the mission, and Phil Michelsen, a retired Seattle firefighter who helped put it all together.

A U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster from McChord Air Force Base delivered the fire engine to Guadalajara International Airport on Friday. The flight was made possible by the federal Denton Amendment program for humanitarian missions conducted by U.S. military units.

The trip was the culmination of many months of effort by hundreds of South Sound residents and organizations who donated time and money, sold T-shirts and hosted benefits to pay for the effort, which they call the "Mission to Mexico."

The mission began in the bar of Lopez's Gig Harbor restaurant, El Pueblito.

Lopez was born in Ayutla and, after making a trip to his hometown in 2005, came back north with horrifying stories of frequent fires and highway accidents in which people died for lack of emergency vehicles.

His stories inspired an outpouring of generosity in Gig Harbor. Last September, a group of a dozen local residents drove the 3,000 miles to Ayutla in a caravan of three donated police cruisers and a fully equipped ambulance.

The firetruck, too big and unwieldy to drive for such a long distance, waited for a ride with the Air Force. The truck previously belonged to the Sultan Fire Department in Snohomish County, which surplused it in 2005.

### **'IT'S A BEAST'**

Unlike last year, when the caravan blared into Ayutla with sirens on and lights flashing and was greeted by mariachi bands and beauty queens, the firetruck's entrance Saturday was subdued.

The big truck was held up in Mexican customs for six hours Friday, forcing the mission crew to drive it through Guadalajara's narrow streets and along Mexico's treacherous Highway 80 in the dark.

When they arrived in Ayutla, it was 1:30 in the morning and all the houses were dark.

Michelsen was at the wheel of the fire engine for most of the way and said it was an experience he never wants to repeat.

"I've never been so scared in my life," said Michelsen, who has 22 years' experience driving firetrucks in downtown Seattle. "The thing's like driving a dump truck. It's a beast. It takes a half a city block to turn."

Before getting behind the wheel at the airport Friday, Michelsen joked to other crew members, "If you guys are following me, just keep track of the things I hit and we'll send them a letter or something later."

He didn't hit anything, but there were several close calls. Highway 80 has no shoulders, and the 10-foot-wide truck nearly filled the 11-foot

lanes. Loaded tractor-trailer rigs and buses going the other direction at top speed passed with inches to spare.

For several miles, Michelsen followed a tractor-trailer rig loaded with live chickens. As he drove, he said, the firetruck was sprayed with a mist of chicken manure.

It started raining soon after that, which made the road slippery. But there was a bright side, Michelsen said: "At least we could see out the windows."

#### 'IT IS BEAUTIFUL'

The gratitude in Ayutla was immediately obvious Saturday morning as residents woke and found the truck parked in front of the police station on the central plaza. Some stopped to stroke the fenders and poke the big red pump mounted on its front bumper.

A 13-year-old boy who's befriended the mission members took it upon himself to wash the big rig, using a pail and a rag.

Ayutla Mayor (or El Presidente, as he's called here) Miguel Gomez said the truck is something the town has desperately needed.

Though surprised to see the truck was yellow, instead of red, as he expected, he said, "It is beautiful. It will save many lives."

The ambulance and the squad cars delivered last year have been a godsend, said Juan Pablo Montes, the town's director of cultural affairs.

"The ambulance is a great help, not only to the town but also to adjacent communities because they have to bring patients to Autlan (the closest city) and in some special cases all the way to Guadalajara," he said.

The ambulance has been used for all types of cases, Montes said, but it's been particularly useful in traffic accidents, which are common.

#### 'BOY, THE BUREAUCRACY'

While the Mission to Mexico crew successfully delivered the firetruck, another part of the mission remains undone.

Accompanying the firetruck on the C-17 were a dozen pallets loaded with firefighting equipment, surf-rescue gear, toys, school supplies and computers. South Sound groups donated the items, which were intended to be delivered to the nearby towns of El Limon, El Grullo and San Francisco (or "San Pancho") on the coast near Puerto Vallarta.

Because of a bureaucratic problem in Mexican customs, all of those items were still sitting on the tarmac in Guadalajara and won't be released until Monday at the earliest, according to Troyer.

That frustrated Garrison, the chief investigator of the Pierce County Office of the Prosecuting Attorney and a member of the Mission to Mexico team. He'd obtained 26 surplus computers from the county and wants to deliver them to children in San Pancho.

He's been through a similar situation, he said, and it took four months for the computers to be released.

"The need here is great," Garrison said, "but there's this bureaucratic obstacle that gets in the way of our generosity and their need.

"It's a great country and I love it, but, boy, the bureaucracy makes me nuts."

Troyer said Saturday that he's confident the equipment will be released Monday as soon as federal clearance comes from Mexico City.

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