

ENTRE AMIGOS

'When a sister is sick ... it's necessary to visit her'

by Kernan Turner Ashland Amigo Club
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Kernan Turner photo. Mayors Alejandro Navarro of Guanajuato (left) and John Stromberg of Ashland hold an Ashland-Guanajuato facemask by its stretch bands in a symbolic gesture of Sister City unity during the COVID-19 pandemic and Ashland's wildfire emergency.

Watching TV news and Facebook pictures of the Almeda fire havoc in far-off Oregon, Guanajuato Mayor Alejandro Navarro asked himself, “How can we help support our sister city?”

Coincidentally, Guanajuato fireman Daniel Barrera called his friend Ramiro Padilla at the El Tapatio restaurant in Ashland, who urged the Heroic Volunteer Fire Corps of Guanajuato to send its firefighters to help their exhausted Ashland counterparts.

Acting on Padilla's appeal, the mayor flew overnight Wednesday to Ashland with five firemen who had received specialized wildfire training in Ashland. Padilla met them at the Medford airport Thursday morning and put them in contact with the Ashland Fire Department, which sent them to the Jackson County fairgrounds evacuation shelter in Central Point.

They helped set up tables and chairs, translated for Spanish-speakers, and provided emergency aid to fire victims and their pets. The volunteer Guanajuato firefighters included a veterinarian and two paramedics.

The firemen also spent time Thursday and Friday helping Padilla's restaurant feed more than 700 mostly Hispanic people who had lost their homes in the fires.

The first time anyone in Ashland knew they were coming was when Navarro posted an official declaration on Facebook earlier in the week to "Ashland Friends."

He announced Guanajuato was sending firefighters "to combine (Ashland and Guanajuato's) strength and power to help fight the Oregon fires." Navarro was reacting to Ramiro Padilla's appeal to Barrera.

When Interim City Manager Adam Hanks learned of Navarro's plans, he contacted Navarro's office on Wednesday noon, telling an aide that the Guanajuato firefighters could not participate in any firefighting activity because it was being coordinated by regional and state command posts, and Ashland was not on fire.

Stromberg called Navarro upon arrival at the airport.

"I ... explained I didn't know what they could do, but firefighting wasn't an option," Stromberg said, adding that he expressed appreciation of "their heartfelt impulse to come" and "their willingness to do whatever would be useful." He offered to cover their hotel and lodging expenses through the weekend.

The two mayors met on Saturday at a local hotel, a meeting interrupted by a CNN interview.

“It capped off what turned out to be a very positive experience and, as I said to Alejandro (Navarro), people will remember this as the time when the mayor of Guanajuato brought five “bomberos” (firefighters) to help Ashland in a disaster.

Mayor Navarro said later in an interview, “[Guanajuato City] didn’t want to go through protocol, we understood [Ashland city officials and the fire department] were busy dealing with a fire emergency on top of a COVID pandemic. We came as a gesture of solidarity and to work.”

In a Facebook posting, he said, “Our sister city is suffering, and as in all families, when a sister is sick, it isn’t enough to call a doctor; it’s necessary to visit her.”

When a reporter asked why he didn’t consult with city officials before pleading with Barrera to send help, restaurateur Padilla answered, “I’m not a politician. I’m a man of action.”

Ashland Amigo Club members provided transportation and offered dinners at their homes for the Guanajuato visitors, with everyone wearing facemasks and trying to observe other COVID-19 precautions, including social distancing and elbow-touching in place of handshakes or Guanajuato “abrazos” (embraces).