

Portland Bomberos Latinos

Portland Fire has been host to many innovative programs over the many decades of operation. Those that come immediately to mind are "Toy & Joy Makers," a toys-for-kids initiative that originated in 1914. The "Milk Program" promoted milk distribution to youth in the city for nutritional purposes. The "Jeff Morris Fire & Life Safety Foundation" provided innovation for funding fire and life safety programs. And the "Portland Bomberos," a program that endeavored to support firefighters in Portland's sister city of Guadalajara, Mexico, a city of vast size and limited fire service resources.

Like most of these innovations, they were they came about because a member of Portland Fire had an idea, a passion, and the skills to carry out the project. It is not unusual, however, to have such programs forgotten as the driving member retires and the program is not taken on by a subsequent champion.

One such program did continue, but not as a Portland Fire initiative. So success it was that it became a standalone non-profit that continued to provide service even through Portland Fire let it fade to history. As is typical, it took a champion to envision, conduct, and continue such an effort. The Portland Bomberos program continues today due to the efforts of Portland Fire Lieutenant, Joseph Troncoso.

Below are stories that share the program from inception to success.

Portland Nonprofit Bomberos Latinos Trains Latin American Firefighters

*By Jenn Chávez - Oregon Public Broadcasting
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For 20 years, a Portland-based nonprofit has been donating equipment and providing Spanish-language fire and rescue training to *bomberos* (firefighters) in Mexico and throughout Latin America.

In 1999, Portland Fire & Rescue Firefighter José Troncoso had an idea.

It came to him while the in Guadalajara, Mexico. The capital of the Mexican state of Jalisco, Guadalajara has been one of Portland, Oregon's sister city program since 1983. As part of that sister-city relationship, Portland Fire was donating a fire engine to the Guadalajara Fire Department at the time. Then Portland Fire & Rescue Chief Ed Wilson asked Troncoso, who is Mexican American and bilingual, to accompany him to Mexico as a translator.

Joe Troncoso



As part of their visit, Wilson and Troncoso got to tour Guadalajara's fire stations and observe the Mexican *bomberos* — firefighters, in Spanish — at work.

“We noticed that their equipment was way behind ours, and that they were doing some techniques that we had long ago abandoned, being that they were unsafe,” Troncoso told OPB’s Weekend Edition.

It got him thinking about what he and other firefighters could do to help. On the flight home, Troncoso drafted what he called a “grandiose plan.” He’d collect equipment to donate to Guadalajara’s fire department, and then update the department’s training with the latest fire and rescue techniques, translated into Spanish and tailored to the needs of the region.

“I was very surprised that Chief Wilson loved the idea, and said he would give me anything necessary to make my dream a reality,” Troncoso said.

That was 20 years ago. Today, his dream lives in the form of the nonprofit he founded, “Bomberos Latinos,” which works in partnership with the Portland Guadalajara Sister City Association. With Troncoso at the helm. Spanish-speaking firefighters from across the U.S. have participated in 60 international training trips, not just to Mexico, but throughout Latin America.

In the program’s infancy, Troncoso traveled to Guadalajara to assess the equipment inventory at every fire station. He opened every fire engine and ladder truck.

“The next thing we had to do is look at the world in which they live,” Troncoso said.

Just as it wouldn't make sense to train the Guadalaran *bomberos* on equipment they couldn't use, it wouldn't make sense to train them to work in conditions that didn't apply to the region.

“For instance, here in Portland, we have hydrants on every corner. We have unlimited water. In Guadalajara, and basically throughout all Latin America, there are essentially no fire hydrants. So they bring the water in a tanker.” When it runs out, they bring a new tanker and switch the supply lines, Troncoso said.

Not only the infrastructure, but the construction of buildings is different in Latin America. For example, in the United States, many homes are wood-framed and have pitched roofs. During a fire, firefighters often go onto the roof and cut a hole with a chainsaw, to help the heat and smoke vent out of the building. But in Latin America, many residences have flat roofs made of concrete, impossible to cut through with chainsaws.

“So we had to not only translate the language of our training, but also adapt it so that it applies to them,” Troncoso said.



After a few years of successful trainings in Guadalajara, word got out about the sessions Troncoso was leading. Soon, he was fielding requests from other countries. While firefighting conditions in Mexico are different from those in the U.S., Troncoso said they're largely universal throughout Latin America. That meant the Bomberos Latinos trainings developed for Guadalajara could easily be applied elsewhere in the region.

“They started contacting us, saying, ‘Hey, is there any way you could come down to Peru, down to Chile, down to Ecuador?’ So, we expanded and started going out there,” Troncoso said.

Bomberos Latinos' website lists training topics including rapid intervention, high-angled rescue, wildland firefighting, incident command, hazardous materials and more. Donations have included a thermal imaging camera, radiation

detection equipment, a fire engine and ladder truck, and — crucially, said Troncoso — air packs.

“The most important tool a firefighter has are the air packs that we wear. We're going into rooms full of smoke, full of fire, elevated temperatures ... most people who die as a result of a fire die from inhaling the smoke, not from burns,” Troncoso said.

Almost none of the departments Bomberos Latinos have worked with had air packs. So Troncoso gathered donated air packs, delivered them and trained firefighters to use them.

“It was very rewarding for us to get notices from departments saying, ‘We went in a building, and we pulled a child out last night, and this child's alive today,’ and they couldn't have done that if they hadn't actually had that equipment,” Troncoso said.



In addition to saving lives in the community, new equipment and training has saved the lives of firefighters themselves. In Guadalajara, several firefighters had died on the job in the years prior to Bomberos Latinos' work with the city's fire department. But in the 20 years since, Troncoso said, not one firefighter has died in the line of duty.

The Guadalajara Fire Department has also changed the way fire stations are distributed throughout the city, based on Portland's model of fire service. In 1999, Guadalajara had only four fire stations citywide, to serve a population of millions.

"The reason here in Portland that we have 30 fire stations is, we try to keep to a response time of four or five minutes ... because if someone is having a heart attack or if there's a fire, those minutes are critical," Troncoso said.

Bomberos Latinos suggested to department leadership in Guadalajara that they add smaller stations into more neighborhoods throughout the city.

"20 years later, Guadalajara now has 17 stations ... and now their response time has been cut drastically, and they're able to save a lot more lives," Troncoso said.

In September 2017, Troncoso got to see some of the rescue personnel he'd trained leap into action. He was in Guadalajara on the 32nd anniversary of a massive earthquake that hit Mexico City in 1985. He'd just completed a training the day prior. On his free day in Guadalajara, he was invited to a simulation and earthquake drill taking place in the city, like others held across the country to mark the anniversary of 1985 'great quake.'

During the simulation, Mexico City was hit with a real 7.1 magnitude earthquake, powerful enough to be felt more than 300 miles away in Guadalajara. Troncoso said Guadalajara's urban search and rescue team, members of which he'd both trained and worked alongside, quickly departed and were some of the first boots on the ground in Mexico City. They spent over a week there doing rescue work in the aftermath of the quake.

Seeing the positive results of the trainings and donations he's helped facilitate over the years has been gratifying for the Portland Fire Lieutenant. He spoke of how it fits into his broader role as a Latino firefighter, and as a Mexican American in particular.

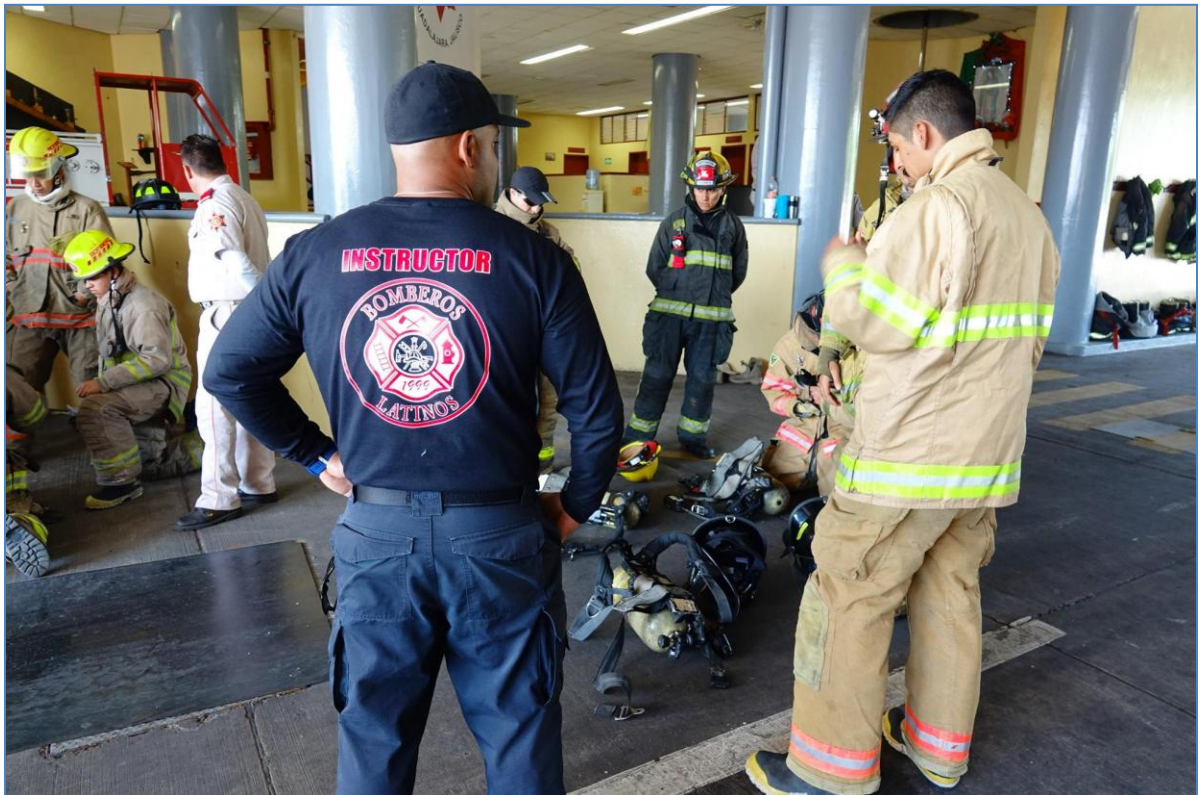
"I grew up in East Los Angeles. My father is from Mexico. He was a Spanish professor his entire life, until he retired. We grew up speaking only Spanish in the home, because my father knew we would pick up English ... I'm forever indebted to my parents for raising us the way they did," Troncoso said.

His bilingualism and the program he founded have taken him to 14 different countries, and on dozens of international training trips. Troncoso said he looks for ways to give back to the community, out of gratitude for the opportunities he's been given in his own life.

"Just having the language opened doors for me to be able to help other people," he said.

Bomberos Latinos has three more trainings scheduled this year, and has received requests for 15 trainings in 2020. Troncoso wishes he had the time to fill all the requests they've received. But, he said, he's looking forward to retiring in the not-so-distant future. After that, he'd like to step up his nonprofit work even more, with a goal of doing a training per month. The work brings him joy.

"I feel very enriched by the experiences of having gotten to know these people, my brother and sister firefighters throughout Latin America, and the experiences I have are unforgettable and a treasure to me."



Royal Rosarians Toast 2019 Newsmakers from Portland Area

Well Earned Recognition Given To Joe Troncoso

Reported by - Pamplin Media Group - February 3, 2020

A Portland firefighter and a neighborhood parade organizer were among those honored in the annual Newsmakers of the Year award ceremony in Portland on Thursday evening, January 30th.

Each year the Royal Rosarians, Portland's "ambassadors of goodwill," acknowledge members of the metro area who drew media coverage for their "exceptional acts of heroism and/or outstanding humanitarian work without regard for personal safety, public recognition, or personal gain."

Among the 10 individuals honored last week was Jose Troncoso, a Portland firefighter who founded Bomberos Latinos, which has provided training and equipment to fellow firefighters in 14 different countries.

Troncoso, who was nominated by KUNP Univision Portland, credited his parents for ensuring that he grew up speaking both Spanish and English. "That has opened so many doors," he said.

Also earning accolades was Steve Slavik, who 30 years ago started a small St. Patrick's Parade in Portland's Alameda-Irvington neighborhood to impress his Irish father-in-law. Since then, it's grown into a huge community celebration that now boasts two dozen entries. The 2019 parade was particularly sweet for "Coach" Slavik, who a month earlier learned that after two rounds of chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant, he was free of leukemia. The self-proclaimed "George Bailey" of northeast Portland was nominated by KGW Channel 8

Pamplin Media Group's nominees were Pamelajean Myers and Jeannine Murrell of Forest Grove. In June, the News-Times reported how Murrell and Myers came to the rescue of their neighbors after noticing smoke coming from the house of the elderly couple.

While Murrell provided key details to the 9-1-1 dispatcher, Myers went inside the burning house, leading the wife to safety through the smoke. As flames grew higher on the exterior, Myers went back in and dragged the woman's husband, who was not ambulatory, out of the house. They reached safety just as a window imploded into the living room, sending a wall of fire to where he had been moments before.

"I'd argue that what you're about to hear describes a true act of heroism," said John Schrag, executive editor of Pamplin Media Group, who introduced the Murrell and Myers during the ceremony. "But it's my experience that such acts are almost always rooted in a lifetime of service."

Schrag noted how the couple is very active in the communities of Forest Grove and Cornelius, donating money to various causes, from the public library and Cornelius Elementary School and volunteering with local groups such as the Forest Grove/Cornelius Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club of Forest Grove.

"This is a couple that walks the talk," Schrag said.

Murrell told the 250 people at the ceremony that she felt lucky to live in a community where people come to the aid of others. She noted that as the house burned, other neighbors emerged to help the couple get the care they needed as paramedics arrived.

Royal Rosarian Prime Minister Kimberly Bown presided over this year's Newsmaker event. The Oregonian/OregonLive.com was this year's marquee sponsor. Portland's former First Lady Nancy Hales and KGW meteorologist Dave Salesky teamed up as master of ceremonies and Mya Brazile, 2019 Portland Rose Festival Queen, was also on hand to greet those who made news last year.



OVER THE YEARS....

The Bomberos Latinos Program has enjoyed great success since this article and award were made. From its inception in 1999 to the end of 2024, the following have been noted:

- 90 international training trips
- 544 courses taught
- 21,796 emergency responder students trained
- 14 countries have received training

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www.PortlandFireHistory.com