



Carlos Medina with the donated vehicle.

A Fire Truck for Santiago

A visit to his impoverished hometown kicks a firefighter into gear.

BY TED KLEINE

Santiago Papasquiaro, in the Mexican state of Durango, sits at the foot of the Sierra Madre, among tan hills covered by a threadbare blanket of brush. Most of its young men have gone to America, so in the deserted afternoon the public squares are empty, except for a few shuffling pensioners shielding their eyes with baseball caps.

Santiago is a city of 46,000, but it has only one fire engine. Built before World War II, with bug-eyed headlights and a rounded red hood, it looks like a rip from Smokey Stover's comic-book firehouse. Not long ago a lumberyard caught fire. The engine's 100-gallon tank didn't hold enough water to quench the blaze, and the city's volunteer firemen had trouble looking into the water system, so they just pushed mounds of dirt around the fire to keep it from spreading. The old engine had been donated by a Bostonian, in 1980. Santiago needed a new benediction.

Carlos Medina Jr. spent his boyhood outside Santiago, in the pueblo of Herrera, population 750. Medina was born in Chicago, but his father took him back to the ancestral village when he was five to get him away from big-city gear. When Carlos was 11 his father brought him back to Chicago to get him away from third-world poverty. The house in Herrera had dirt floors and no toilet. Carlos was one of the few boys in

town who wore shoes.

In America, Medina prospered. He built a career as a landscape designer for the movies, wrangling plans for *U.S. Marshall, Hoodlum*, and *Ali*. By his mid-50s he owned a car wash, a lawn-care company, and six apartment buildings. A cell phone bobbed on his belt, chirping constantly with calls from clients or from one of his 40 cousins. But the Chicago film industry was losing production to Canada. So in 1999, Medina joined the Chicago Fire Department: it paid \$52,000 a year, and the one-day-on, two-days-off schedule gave him time to manage his various businesses.

Medina had been a fireman two years when he and his wife, Nochil, took their four children to Durango to show them the family's heritage. He brought along a box of Chicago Fire Department T-shirts to trade with his Mexican colleagues.

He had been to Mexico only once since his youth, and now he belonged to a 5,000-man force equipped to fight the Second Chicago Fire. So he was stunned by the country's primitive firehouses. Santiago's was an adobe shack behind an old train depot, Petitioner Junction, Medina thought. The firemen confronted flames in shirt and pants, without respirators. They slept in tiny cubicles, worked 24 hours on, 24 hours off, and never took vacations. The ambulances were ancient Chevy vans.

In Durango, the state capital, Medina taught the firemen to tie the knots and showed them how to raise a ladder. The chief gave him a badge.

Back at Engine 65, at Archer and Sacramento, nobody believed Medina's stories about Mexican fire fighting.

"I can't believe the way they live here and the way they have it there," he told the guys. "We always complain about what we don't have here—maybe we want a new fire engine—and

then we go to another country and they've got nothing!"

"You're crazy," another firefighter told him. "I've been to Cancun. I've been to Mazatlan. Nobody lives like that."

"You've never been to the interior," Medina replied. Medina decided to bring Durango's fire fighting into the 21st century, or at least the late 20th. He set out training videos and manuals. When Chicago firefighters returned in old coats and pants at the commissary, Medina claimed them and wrapped them in care packages.

Then he noticed the Chicago Fire Department was retiring its old specialty engines—the now federal safety regulations called for closed cabs.

"How," he thought, "can I get my hands on one of these?"

There is a song about Santiago by the Mexican balladeer Jose Ramon Valdez. *Santiago Papasquiaro, no eres que no olvidado de ti*, it goes: "Santiago, don't think that I have forgotten about you." The lament strikes a deep chord with many of Chicago's Durangoans, who began migrating here in the 1940s to work in the steel mills. The mines of Durango had always shipped ore to the foundries of Chicago. Eventually "people got curious about where it was going, and after World War II they started coming here," says Eduardo Rodriguez, a founder of Durango Unido, a group of natives who send computers and medical missions to their impoverished home state.

"A lot of people have done well here and forgotten about Durango," Rodriguez says. "Durango suffers from its own success." But it also benefits from native sons who remember that before they were rich men in America, they were poor boys in Mexico.

"Even though I wasn't born there, I feel such a sense of connection, because

I spent impressive years above," Medina says. "My father came to this country, couldn't speak a word of English, and he was able to make it here. Started his own landscaping company. If it weren't for my father taking a chance, I'd still be there."

In the fall of 2000, Medina heard that a small town near Poona was planning to scrap a gasoline-powered engine. It called the fire department. Don't scrap it, he implored them. Give it to me; I'll send it to Mexico. Medina spent \$5,000 on repairs, even hiring a sign maker to paint the engine with its new seal: the city of Durango. When the governor of Durango visited the "Waco State Technical Institute as part of a trade mission, Medina handed him the keys. It was ceremonial, Medina and a coworker later drove the engine to Leonido, where Durango firefighters took possession at the border.

"You're welcome at a guest in my home anytime," the county governor told Medina. Then another member of the governor's party pushed forward and offered his hand. It was Enrique Medina, a distant cousin and the mayor of Santiago.

"Why didn't you give it to us?" he asked. "We would have taken it."

"I never thought about it," Medina confessed. He had spent more time in the Durango firehouse. He still talked to the chief on the telephone. "The next one I get, I promise I'll give it to you."

Soon afterward Medina was transferred to Engine 108, at Milwaukee and Wilson. In the corner of the parking lot, in the shade of an overhanging tree, he saw an open-lab engine. He watched it for weeks. It never seemed to go anywhere. Do we ever use that? He finally asked his district chief, "Do you think I can have it?" "Dad told him. We start it once a week, but it hasn't been on a run in over a year. It's going to be retired."

"I'd like to either buy it or get it donated," Medina said. "I want to send it to a department in Mexico."

Dad had traveled in Mexico. He knew the poverty. And Medina's determination reminded him of a quote from Goethe: "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now." "Dad started calling his superiors. Fire Commissioner James Joyce agreed to let the truck go. Meanwhile Medina lobbied the local alderman, Patrick Lewis. Lewis passed a resolution in the City Council selling the engine to Medina for a dollar.

How all he needed was another \$10,000. He had it. He had done \$500 million worth work in 2002, so Nochil told him to find the money somewhere besides the family bank account. Medina's brother-in-law set up a fund at Austin Bank. His cousin Javier, who owns Barbeque's Restaurant in Avondale, kicked in four grand to get him started.

Jaime Rubio, Santiago's director of

emergency services, left up from Mexico this January to see his city's new fire engine and to let his Santiago natives for donations. The engine was parked at the Ogden Avenue Truck Wash in Cicero, a garage owned by Leo Aguilar, another of Medina's 40 cousins.

A few hours after landing at O'Hare, Rubio—a tan, mustachioed man, well dressed for Durango in light wood slacks and a windbreaker—walked into the chilly garage. The engine's red paint glowed dully under the dim lamps. Its bed was cluttered with dried ropes and last autumn's leaves. The worn-out non-mechanics, a sorry, greasy, diseased organ, lay on the concrete floor.

"It's beautiful," Rubio said in Spanish.

He grinned and nodded like a new car buyer as Medina led him around the engine, showing off the ladders, the oscillating headlamp, the 500-gallon tank. "We were looking at buying a used truck from San Diego," Rubio said. "It would have cost \$8,000 to \$10,000. We don't have the resources for a right now."

Rubio climbed into Medina's van. They drove to a parking in Potage Park. In its muddy garage lot, another girl waited. Just before New Year's someone had given Medina a 1970 ambulance. The doctor had been planning to turn it into an RV but couldn't afford the work.

"The Red Cross has three ambulances, but the fire department doesn't have any," Rubio said. "This will be part of the fire department. We can use it to transport elderly to the hospital. This is going out with the fire engine at all times. Instead of us calling the Red Cross, and a fireman-paramedic will drive it."

Rubio spent the week begging local Santiagueros for money to fix the engine and flatbed it to Mexico. He went to a dinner for an aldermanic candidate in Phoenix. He climbed into the car of a prominent donor when they went home to Mexico for Christmas. Everyone told him it was wonderful; just wonderful to hear the fire department was getting a modern fleet. But Rubio left Chicago without a penny. The engine sat at the truck wash, waiting for a mechanic. Just before flying out, he called Medina.

"I don't want to do it. Yeah, yeah, yeah," he said. "I can't believe nobody wants to help."

"That wasn't quite me," Medina had found one man who wanted to help.

In mid-January, Medina had spent an evening at the East Bank Club, trying to pay dollars from the Mexican-American Contractors Association. All the contractors kept their wallets in their pants that night. But two weeks later, he got an odd note. "Your mother had taken ill down in Santiago, and he'd had to hire a car to drive her to the hospital in Durango, three hours away. How, he asked, would Medina like \$100 to repair the ambulance?" Medina hadn't let him forget. It hit him in the pocket. Medina thought, and it hit him in the heart. ■