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Brother Fire Chief

By Cathy Dausman



A man of two cloths: Brother Chris Donnelly holds his Fire Chief uniform. Photo Cathy Dausman

Christopher Donnelly moves a bit closer to heaven each time he reports to work at his second job. During the academic school year "Brother Chris," a Christian Brother assigned to Saint Mary's College, serves as project manager of facilities services for the college. During summers, however, Brother Chris lives and works in the High Sierras, both as sub-director at Camp LaSalle and as the Huntington Lake Volunteer Fire Department chief.

Huntington Lake is a recreation area east of Fresno and south of Yosemite within the boundaries of the Sierra National Forest, elevation 7,000 feet. Winter residency is a mere 34 souls, but the population swells to more than 14,000 in summer.

While scenic, the area is also remote. Fresno is two hours away by car, response by ambulance from the nearest station is at least 45 minutes, and although there is a helipad near the lake itself, weather and daylight dictate whether medevac flights are even possible.

HLVFD was established in 1993, although it struggled to maintain its apparatus, and field an adequate number of volunteers. Clovis fire captain Tom Zinn was HLVFD's first chief. Its equipment was limited to a 1956 water tender fire truck "with four flats and no brakes," Donnelly recalls. In 1997 Donnelly and camp director Brother Jack Henderson watched a camp guest suffer a transient ischemic attack or mini stroke. Two more back-to-back medical issues - a Boy Scout with a serious chest wound and a rollover car accident extrication in 1998 - convinced Henderson to earn an Emergency Medical Technician license. Henderson convinced Brother Chris to do the same; two years later he admits he was "hooked."

With a background and interest in heavy machinery - Donnelly holds a general contractor's license - he learned to drive Huntington Lake's old tired fire truck.

HLVFD volunteers used to joke they could only extinguish fires by driving their truck over the flames, Donnelly says. The engine's control lines were frozen and split and poured water over the road when placed in pump gear. Zinn spent four years training the Brothers, then Donnelly became chief.

Today, HLVFD has earned an Insurance Services Office rating, and is regarded as one of the best volunteer departments in the state. The current staff of 13 operates newer equipment in better condition - it owns everything from a 2006 Pierce Structure 1,000 gallon engine to a 4x4 and snowmobile, and a Jaws of Life rescue tool. HLVFD cruises the seven mile length of the lake in a converted Navy harbor patrol boat it shares with the local sheriff's department and the U.S. Forest Service.

The department aims for a six minute response time. Donnelly says his fire work requires about six hours a week in training, and on average about an hour or so a day on actual calls. His summer uniform consists mostly of "T-shirts and Levis" and he reserves his fire service uniform for fundraising - a job for which he is obviously well suited.

HLVFD receives no funding from state or county taxes, yet its operating budget has grown from a \$300 bank account to approximately \$110,000 - thanks to gifts, donations and grants. "Our balance sheet shows us worth over \$3 million in assets," in cash, buildings and apparatus, said Brother Chris.

Bass Lake Ranger District Fire Management Officer David Cooper met Brother Chris in 2000, as Cooper travelled through the Huntington Lake area. He got to know him as they worked together on small fires.

Cooper says Donnelly and Brother Jack once worked a 24-hour shift using their 1956 water tender to fight a fire threatening local homes after other equipment broke down. "You can always depend on Brother Chris. He's there with a smile," Cooper says. "You can never go by [Camp LaSalle] without [getting] a milkshake."

Lamorinda's Emergency Preparedness Manager Dennis Rein met Donnelly during the Aspen fire in 2013. "I was working as the Liaison Officer for the Incident Management Team," Rein says. "It didn't take long for me to meet up with the fire chief from the Huntington Lake Volunteer Fire Department." As they exchanged phone numbers, Rein inquired about his Moraga prefix and learned Donnelly worked at Saint Mary's.

"The relationship was instantaneous! We worked together for almost three weeks," Rein says. "Brother Chris even treated me to an ice cream at [Camp LaSalle's] Hofbrau." When asked how long he intends to remain HLVFD chief, Donnelly replies in a most down-to-earth manner, "Well, there isn't a long list of candidates that want to do this for nothing."

Huntington Lake Volunteer Fire Department is a 501 (c) 3 corporation. For details, visit www.hlvfd.org online.



Fire Chief Chris Donnelly, left, patrols Huntington Lake in 2013 with Public Information Officer Anne Grandy during the 2013 Aspen Fire, when the HLVFD boat was used to provide security for the fire helicopter "dip site." Photo Dennis Rein

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