

A Fire Truck Called ‘The Spirit of Louisiana’

Louisiana’s heroic response to the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks included the gifts of a bright red fire truck to the New York Fire Dept. Thousands of ordinary citizens, students and businesses gave from the heart to make it happen.

By Trent Angers

It’s not an everyday occurrence when the people of one state give the people of another state a \$350,000 gift for Christmas. But this is exactly what happened in December of 2001 when a shiny red fire truck was delivered to Engine Co. 283 in Brooklyn, N.Y. The large gift card tucked under the windshield read, “To: New York City. From: People of Louisiana.”

In giving this special gift, Louisiana led the way – and a number of other states followed – in a nationwide effort to donate fire trucks to the New York Fire Department, which lost some 35 fire trucks and other emergency vehicles in the Sept.11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City. The vehicles were destroyed when the World Trade Center collapsed after being rammed by hijacked commercial jets piloted by deranged Middle Eastern sociopaths. In all, some 3,000 people were killed or are presumed dead, including 343 firefighters who were trying to save the occupants of the Twin Towers.

The money to buy the fire truck was raised in a statewide, grass-roots program called “Buck\$ for Fire Truck\$.” The drive was headed up by Gov. Mike Foster and State Rep. Hunt Downer of Houma. Contributions flooded in from individual citizens, businesses, school children, firefighters, police, National Guardsmen, members of the Louisiana Legislature, State employees and others.

Motivated by a strong desire to do something to help their fellow Americans, thousands upon thousands of Louisianians of all ages, from all walks of life, donated money ranging from a few pennies to several thousand dollars. They gave from the heart, and money flowed in from all 64 parishes.



“If ever there was a noble cause, this is it,” Gov. Foster stated back in October. “The New York City Fire Department tells me they need \$47 million dollars worth of new fire, ambulance and support equipment to replace what they lost. I really want Louisiana to lead the way in this. We have a company right here in Louisiana that makes fire-fighting equipment, and they are willing to help. I know that if the same thing happened in our state, we would appreciate any help we could get.”

The eyes of the nation were on the Pelican State as the major television networks and cable news channels reported on Louisiana’s heroic response to the Sept. 11 tragedy. In November a CBS News crew came in to cover the all-encompassing fund-raising effort. ABC told the story prior to a National Football League game on a Monday night in the Superdome in December. NBC featured Gov. Foster on its “Today” show while he was in New York for the delivery of the fire truck just before Christmas. Fox News’ New Orleans affiliate, WVUE, had a videographer in the new fire truck as it made its way across the country, and some of this unique footage was broadcast nationally.

One effect of all the publicity was that people throughout the country were inspired to donate to their own state’s campaign to raise money for fire trucks for New York. Another effect was that tens of millions of Americans had the opportunity to learn something about the spirit of Louisiana.

Ron Goldman’s brainchild

The idea of donating a fire truck to New York was born in the mind of Ron Goldman of New Orleans on the afternoon of Sept. 14, 2001, just three days after the terrorist attacks. He was at home watching TV when CNN began airing coverage of President Bush addressing rescue workers at “Ground Zero” – the site where the Twin Towers had stood. It was a depressing and desolate scene, one that closely resembled a bombed-out city in Europe during World War II.

The President was standing on a burned-out fire truck that was destroyed when the towers came down. He spoke using a megaphone.

“I want you all to know that America today is on bended knee in prayer for the people whose lives were lost here, for the workers who work here, for the families who mourn. This nation stands with the good people of New York City, and New Jersey and Connecticut, as we mourn the loss of thousands of our citizens.”

One of the workers interrupted the President.

“I can’t hear you,” he said.

“I can hear *you*,” President Bush responded, and the group applauded. “The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear from all of us soon.”

At this, the group erupted in a loud chant:

“U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!...”

The President resumed:

“The nation sends its love and compassion to everybody who is here. Thank you for your hard work. Thank you for making the nation proud. And may God bless America.”

Again the rescue workers began chanting:

“U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!...”

Goldman watched and listened from his chair in his living room in New Orleans, mesmerized and deeply moved by what he was witnessing.

“This is when I said to myself, ‘New York is in trouble.’ I knew New York needed help. I really wanted to help, but felt powerless. Still, I was determined to do something to ease their burden,” Goldman recalls.

The image of President Bush standing on the burned-out fire truck was fresh in his mind when another haunting picture appeared on TV: A gutted fire truck being lifted from the rubble by a crane.

“When I saw those images on TV, it just clicked. I knew we had to somehow get them new fire trucks,” Goldman says.

A few days later, Goldman acted on his idea. He called and talked to Gov. Foster while Foster was doing his regular weekly radio call-in program, “Live Mike.”

Goldman suggested that a fund-raising drive be started to gather the money to buy a fire truck for New York, to replace one of the three dozen they lost in the terrorist attacks. With high energy and conviction in his voice, he described the goal as “something concrete,” an idea around which Louisianians could rally.

Goldman had Foster’s attention; he hoped the governor would take the idea to heart.

Foster indicated he liked the concept, and he promised Goldman he would look into it further.

It turned out that Foster liked the idea even more than he let on. In fact, he was immediately taken by Goldman’s idea. He loved the thought of Louisiana leading the nation in doing something so concrete, so meaningful, in this time of national tragedy. The very thought of it seemed to energize the otherwise low-key chief executive.

Within days Foster had secured significant monetary pledges from members of the Louisiana Senate to help pay for the truck. From here, he quickly cleared the legal hurdles for the State to provide a big part of the money if necessary. However, this public-private partnership approach to funding the fire truck was soon abandoned in favor of a purely private initiative.

Foster was so enthusiastic about donating fire trucks to New York that he challenged other governors to do the same. Many of them took him up on the challenge and started their own drives.

Meanwhile, two weeks after calling in his idea to the governor, Goldman was driving to work when he heard a disc jockey talking about building a fire truck for New York. Goldman called the station and learned that Foster had already gotten pledges of more than \$17,000 from elected officials and that construction of the truck was underway.

“I was shocked! People from that radio station and the Governor’s Office were trying to contact me, to let me know, but they had lost my name and number,” Goldman says.

By now, various State agencies had entered into friendly competition as they challenged one another to see which could raise the most money. The State Police, the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and other agencies were busily at work soliciting funds from fellow employees, friends and relatives.

A gift from the heart

Though the governor originally envisioned the use of some taxpayer money if necessary, it soon became obvious that the private sector could pull the weight entirely on its own. The interest level was high among the people, and the number of enthusiastic and vocal supporters was growing all the time.

One person who recognized this early on was State Rep. Hunt Downer of Houma, who spearheaded the fundraising project.

“It would mean so much more to our citizenry to allow them to participate,” he said. “My office has been flooded with calls, and everywhere I go, people say, ‘This is coming from us.’ It’s really pulling together the people of Louisiana.”

In the early going, Downer described the project to his fellow members of the State Legislature, and all 104 of them pledged to contribute. Downer, too, made a donation, as did Gov. Foster, as did all members of Louisiana’s Congressional delegation.

The state was buzzing with talk of the fire truck in October and November, as contributions poured in from every direction. Firefighters were standing at major traffic intersections “shaking the boot” for donations from motorists who were stopped for red lights. They also brought their boots to the LSU football game at Tiger Stadium on Nov. 10 and to the New Orleans Saints game on Nov. 18. School children throughout the state contributed in an organized fashion in the week of Nov. 12-16. Banks and savings and loans statewide became collection points for anyone wanting to donate, as did several retail chain stores. The Louisiana State Firemen’s Assn. agreed to receive and handle the donations. Executives of Georgia-Pacific and Zapp’s Potato Chips in Gramercy led the campaign to convince businesses to chip in.

After all was said and done, the campaign not only reached its \$500,000 goal but nearly doubled it, providing enough money to buy a second truck. By June 30, 2002 there was enough to purchase a third unit. The official deadline for accepting contributions was Dec. 31, 2001, but that was extended. And money is still coming in.

One of the most unique contributions came from the men who built the truck, employees of the Ferrara Fire Apparatus Co. in Holden, La. Early in the campaign, many of the workers offered to donate their time to help build the truck, in order to keep the cost down. Some men worked overtime and didn’t charge for it. Some went to work at 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning. Many of them donated a day’s pay to help fund the hard costs, and they conducted raffles to raise cash, according to Ron Goldman.

“They literally dedicated their lives to building this truck,” Goldman points out.

Company president Chris Ferrara says he was confident from the beginning that the project would be successful and the deadline would be met.

“Our people wanted Louisiana to be the first to give New York its own fire engine. With their help, some extra shifts, and shuffling some projects, we knew we could deliver the truck by Christmas Day,” he stated.

The truck, which normally takes six to eight months to build, was completed in less than two months. It pumps 1,000 gallons of water per minute and costs about \$350, 000. Accessories such as a ladder and hoses cost \$95,000 more, according to the New York Fire Dept.

The 29-foot, 42,000-pound pumper was christened “The Spirit of Louisiana.” Gov. Foster spoke at the ceremony in Holden.

“This fire truck is a gift from our hearts and our hands,” he stated. “It’s a working monument to many of the values which we all share: generosity, triumph over tragedy, pulling together in times of trouble, and good old-fashioned hard work. That’s what ‘The Spirit of Louisiana’ is all about.”

Of those killed in the terrorist attacks, four were Louisianians. The new fire truck was made and donated in their memory, Rep. Downer pointed out. These men include Kevin Yokum of Lake Charles and Lt. Michael “Scott” Lamana of Baton Rouge, both of whom died in the Pentagon attack in

Washington; and Russell Keene III of Sulphur and Louis Williams III of Mandeville, both of whom are missing and presumed dead in the Twin Towers disaster.

A glorious trip across America

The fire truck's 1,300-mile journey to New York began on the night of Dec. 18 from the Louisiana Superdome. It was a nationally televised send-off as the truck rolled up in the 'dome prior to a Monday night football game between the New Orleans Saints and Indianapolis Colts. The huge television audience and the 70,000 fans heard a brief version of the story of Louisiana's gift to the New York Fire Department. Then it was off to New York.

The driver was Dean Smith, 39, of Gonzales. Smith had delivered fire trucks before for the Ferrara Co., but this one was special. Smith is the chaplain for the Gonzales Fire Dept., as well as for the Ascension Parish Sheriff's Office. He's also a Justice of the Peace. And he's the man who delivered the invocation when the fire truck was christened.

The fire truck left the 'dome about 8 p.m., got onto Interstate 10, then turned north on I-59 to begin its trek through Mississippi, the first of nine states it would cross on the way to New York.

The truck was part of a convoy which included a Louisiana State Police escort, a bus full of Louisiana firefighters, several support vehicles and a few cars with ordinary citizens who went along to be a part of it all, to support the cause. The convoy moved at about 60 m.p.h.

When the travelers got to the Mississippi state line they were met by a Mississippi State Police escort, and they proceeded north on I-59. As they approached the first overpass over the interstate highway Smith saw what he thought was an accident scene on the overpass. A few fire trucks and police cars, with red and blue lights flashing, seemed to be working an accident. But as they got closer several people lit sparklers. Firemen began waving a big American flag and others stood at attention and saluted. They were saluting Louisiana's efforts to help their wounded brothers in New York.

"I thought, 'What a nice gesture,' but I didn't give it a lot of thought at this point," Smith recalls.

After passing the intersection he noticed in his rear-view mirror that the drivers of the Mississippi fire trucks and police cars seemed to be trying to catch up with the convoy, as if to join it.

As the convoy approached the next overpass, Smith saw more fire trucks, police cars, ambulances, all with their red or blue lights flashing. There were road flares, American flags being waved, and banners with slogans of support for firefighters, such as "We support our brothers in N.Y." There were also fire trucks on the off-ramp and the on-ramp after the overpass. It was a huge display of moral support and encouragement.

Smith choked up. He found tears dripping down his cheeks. The passengers in the truck with him were in a similar state.

Again, as they passed the intersection, Smith could see in his mirror that the Mississippi fire trucks and police cars were following the convoy, trying to catch up to join it.

The same scene was repeated over and over again as the convoy made its way through the cool Mississippi night. By now, Smith had to keep his handkerchief out to wipe the tears of joy.

"Frankly, I cried halfway through Mississippi. For a while there I could hardly see to drive. And I don't consider myself to be an especially emotional person," Smith says.

After passing half a dozen overpasses, Smith – who was in radio communication with other vehicles in the convoy – decided to get off the interstate and pull in to a shopping center parking lot in Laurel so the firefighters from the two states could meet and visit for a little while.

“The Spirit of Louisiana” came to a stop, and many of the men got out of their vehicles to introduce themselves, to shake hands, and to hug. While the new Louisiana unit was parked, the Mississippi fire trucks drove in front of it in a procession. As they passed the shiny new unit they saluted it – with their sirens, their horns, their flashing red lights. And the men on the fire trucks saluted as well.

Seeing that the Louisiana unit did not have an American flag attached to it, one of the Mississippi Fire Departments donated and tied a five-foot flag to it. The flag would fly from the back of the truck for the rest of the trip.

“The Spirit of Louisiana” stopped for fuel in Hattiesburg. Smith pumped about 50 gallons of diesel. When he went inside to pay, the clerk informed him that someone else had already paid for the fuel.

On the way out of Mississippi, after being greeted at 20 or more overpasses, Smith and friends thought the emotional part of the trip was over. However, there was one more group of fire trucks lined up along the interstate, with flashing red lights going and sirens blaring, as the Louisiana truck reached the state line.

It was about one o’clock in the morning, and the convoy, now back to its original size, was joined by an escort of Alabama State Police. Other State Police escorts joined them as they crossed the state lines into Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia and finally Washington, D.C.

In Washington, the travelers checked into a Marriott Hotel and slept soundly, resting up for a ceremony at the White House.

Dressed up in his sharp-looking chaplain’s uniform, Smith drove the fire truck to the White House several hours before the ceremony so it could be checked by security personnel and put into position to be photographed. While waiting he chatted with SWAT team police and Secret Service agents. He offered them some Louisiana-brand Zapp’s Potato Chips, the peppery variety, and they each ate a bag or two of chips.

While this was going on, Smith was approached by a middle-aged man in a jogging suit. It was President Bush! They had a one-on-one conversation. It was 7 or 7:30 a.m.

“We’re praying for you, Mr. President,” Smith says.

“Please keep praying for me, because I can feel your prayers here in the White House. This thing (the war on terrorism) is nowhere near over, ya know,” Bush responds.

When the formal ceremony began on the South Lawn of the White House, President Bush thanked Gov. Foster, Ronnie Goldman and the people of Louisiana. He recounted the story of how Goldman planted the seed that started the fundraising drive to buy the fire truck for New York.

“I particularly love this story, about how Ronnie decides to do something on behalf of his fellow citizens. So he gets on the phone and calls a local radio personality – the governor! And out of that came a huge volunteer effort in the state of Louisiana to provide help and aid to the good people of New York City.

“And I think Americans need to understand that this is the kind of story that makes our country so unique and so different. It’s a story that makes me so proud to be the President of such a great land,” Bush says.

After the ceremony in Washington – which was covered by the major networks and cable stations – it was time for the final leg of the trip to New York.

The day after they arrived, the Louisiana delegation were on the nationally televised “Today” Show, broadcast live from Rockefeller Center. They wore T-shirts with “The Spirit of Louisiana” printed on them. The story of the truck being delivered was great news, heartwarming news, to New Yorkers, and many would express their gratitude in meaningful ways while the Louisianians were in the city. The T-shirts made them easy to recognize.

“The New Yorkers would stop us on the streets and say, ‘Thank you for what you’re doing for our people in New York,’” Smith reports.

A group of Louisianians went into a steakhouse, were recognized by their T-shirts, and received a standing ovation, Smith says, adding that the manager of the place refused to allow them to pay for their meals.

“Talking to the President was a thrill, and I’ll never forget the trip through Mississippi, but the reality of what we were doing and why really hit me when we visited several fire stations in New York. Each had memorials to the men they had lost in the Trade Center disaster. This is when it really hit home. This is when it really got to us,” Smith explains.

Conclusion

After their appearance on the “Today” show, the Louisiana group crossed the Brooklyn Bridge with their spiffy new fire truck, which, by now, had taken on true celebrity status. They headed for Engine Co. 283 in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, which would be the permanent home for the fire truck.

They were warmly greeted by New York firefighters and their families. The ceremony to turn over the truck included talks by Gov. Mike Foster, Gov. George Pataki, Station Capt. Rocco Rinaldi, Louisiana Representative Hunt Downer and others. A special tribute was paid to the one fireman from Engine Co. 283 who died in the Trade Center’s collapse, Vincent Morello; his brother and father, both of whom are firefighters, were in attendance.

The New Yorkers and Louisianians enjoyed a meal of jambalaya, prepared by visitors from Gonzales, La., the “Jambalaya Capital of the World.”

The occasion was marked by an abundance of camaraderie, goodwill and holiday cheer, an atmosphere befitting this season of giving. The event proved to be a celebration of brotherhood, not only among the firefighters, but also among the people of Louisiana and New York.