



Monday, April 28, 2008

Europeans attend Colorado Firecamp

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Instructors at Colorado Firecamp welcomed their first two international students, Paulo Gonçalves of Portugal and Nicola Lazzarini of Italy, earlier this month.

The men learned about the year-round camp based at Ponderosa Lodge, by searching the Internet.

Gonçalves, 43, lives in Porto, the second largest city in Portugal, with his wife and two children. Porto, with about a million population is the second largest city in Portugal.

Lazzarini, 36, lives in a small village of about 5,000 people near Lake Como, about 30 miles from Milan, Italy.

The men attended camp the first three weeks in April, taking intermediate classes to learn safety and how to deal with wildfires and urban fires.

They said they benefited from the experience, praising instructors and camp coordinator Kent Maxwell, Chaffee County Fire Protection District Station 4 captain.

"He's really a first class guy," Gonçalves said. "He's taken care of all of us and makes us feel comfortable."

Lazzarini agreed, "Kent is a fine kind of guy. We have a good laugh together."

Lazzarini and Gonçalves are volunteer firefighters in their respective countries.

Gonçalves researched a fire camp in Spain, but wasn't accepted because he didn't belong to a fire department.

In Portugal, he manufactures and sells textiles and has been assisting firefighters for six years. He plans to start the first company in Portugal for forest protection and surveillance, after taking a firefighting course there.

Lazzarini works in information technology, but has been helping fight fires more than 20 years.

The men noticed differences between firefighting in the U.S. and in their countries. American firefighters are more concerned with safety, they said.

When Lazzarini helped extinguish a fire for the first time at 15 years old, he went because a friend asked him. He didn't wear a protective suit.

The situation has improved in Italy, he said, but safety precautions are nowhere near what he learned at Colorado Firecamp.

In Portugal, firefighters use equipment, but there are "unfortunately a lot of injuries and some deaths," Gonçalves said. He noted about 20 people - not all firefighters - died of fire-related causes in 2003.

There were 12 fire deaths in 2005, six of them firefighters, he said.

One positive change in Portugal is the requirement to wear a protective suit when fighting fires, he said.

A difference Gonçalves noticed was the cause of fires. Ninety percent of fires in Portugal are caused by human activity, he said.

Maxwell said that figure is similar in big U.S. cities, but, in Colorado and the western U.S., there is a higher percentage of lightning-caused fires.

In Italy, 1 percent of fires start from natural causes and many are sparked by arsonists, Lazzarini said.

"The way American firefighters work is a lot more demanding than in Portugal," Gonçalves added. "Here there is a lot of physical work like hauling water."

In addition to equipment used at the camp, Gonçalves said he was surprised by "the training and people's attitudes. We were extremely welcome, which makes you feel good."

Lazzarini said most people in Italy "are friendly, but not like here."

They were grateful Salida Fire Chief Don Taylor "went out of his way" to welcome them by making a special trip to the camp and showing them around Salida Fire Department.

Maxwell said he hopes Lazzarini and Gonçalves will spread the word to other firefighters in their countries and other European nations to attend the camp.

He said he knows of an Argentinian firefighter interested in attending.

"Our camp is nationally and internationally known, and people are paying to travel here," Maxwell said. "We look forward to the possibility of having students from other parts of the world."

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