

Thoughts from the Rose parade

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By Pam Harnden Livermore Falls Advertiser

January 10, 2020

FARMINGTON — Farmington Fire Rescue firefighters Stephan Bunker and Patty Cormier traveled to Pasadena, California last week for the annual Rose parade, also known as the Tournament of Roses parade.



The Odd Fellows' float in the Rose Bowl parade honored first responders from across the country. Farmington Fire Rescue Department member Stephan Bunker at left watched the parade from a nearby grandstand while Patty Cormier rode on the float during the parade. *File photo*

Maine Rebekah member Michele Trynor of South Portland came up with the idea following the deadly explosion Sept. 16 at the LEAP facility. The Odd Fellows' and Rebekahs' float for the Rose Bowl parade honoring first responders was approved last January. Through Trynor's efforts funds were raised for the two Farmington firefighters to be part of the event. Bunker watched the parade from a grandstand while Cormier waved to the crowds from the float.

Cormier said they arrived early on Dec. 31 at the warehouse where probably a third of the floats were.

“We helped with clean up and assorted tasks, and then I and the 14 others who were riding on the float had to be in position as the judges went around to each float and us riders had to pretend we were actually in the parade, waving and such with the music on,” she said. “There were a number of award categories. Our float did not get any this year.”

Bunker added, “We had passes to gain access to the huge warehouse where approximately 20 of the floats were being assembled and adorned with last touches of flowers and other materials. A fantastic, hectic pace to complete floats in time for official judging by the Rose bowl judging team; a live rehearsal for how they would present themselves when in the parade. Hundreds of volunteers had been there for many days working from staging to get to the floats’ highest elements.

“We then headed to the Sierra Madre mountain range (now known as the San Gabriel Mountains) in the rented car to check out the amazing mountains,” Cormier said. “On the 1st, Steve got on one bus with the grandstand people, and the 15 of us floaters got on another at 5 a.m. for transport to our respective areas. We arrived at the whole lineup of just the floats and it was fun to have time to see them all before the parade. At 8 a.m., we started moving.”

Bunker and Cormier shared their general impressions of the floats, the parade and the spectators.

“The floats were unbelievably creative with all sorts of living material, reeds, grasses, mucho flowers, with each flower in a small water capsule to keep them fresh,” Cormier said. “The parade was incredibly organized and the spectators were all about the celebration. They were really cheering when our float came around until we realized that it was the three white jumpsuit poop scooper guys hamming it up in front of us every time they picked up poop, they really got the crowd cheering! We got a good laugh on that one!”

Bunker said, “The immensity of the event, the people, floats, support crews, flowers, the crowds, music, dancing, horses...

“It took me easily from the tragedy of Sept 16th even while we were celebrating first responders. It was a huge morale booster.

“So many strangers who saw our department name on our hats and badges know of our community and our loss, gave sincere condolences. It was heartwarming.”

Cormier said the thing that stood out for her was it was all positive.

“It was a moment in time that everyone forgot what negatives are in the world to celebrate,” she said. “How can you not when you are immersed in flowers?”

Cormier waved pretty much the entire parade route

“My arms got a little sore, it was five miles of waving, but seemed endless,” she said. “We all pretty much waved the entire time. I tried hard to do the two-handed Yankee wave! It was funny too, we’d be waving then the float would stop for whatever reason, and everyone would stop waving, the crowd, us. Then the float would get going again and the waves would start again.”

The Odd Fellows float used eucalyptus for the roof of the fire truck and mashed up coconut mix for the rest of the truck and the house, Cormier said. Carnations, roses, tulips and other flowers Cormier didn’t recognize made up much of the whole base, plus two fir trees.

“The sweet smell of roses stuck out to me,” Cormier said. “In the warehouse, it was generally a sweet organic mix kind of smell, hard to describe, all pleasant that is for sure!”

One unexpected experience happened during the parade itself which viewers may not have seen.

“The Odd Fellows Grand Master had a medical event at mile 3,” Cormier said. “He had to be taken by ambulance to the hospital.”

Cormier was also struck by how the floats maneuvered.

“The driver of the float was in the back underneath everything in a tiny 3 x 3 hole with monitors that he used to drive the thing,” she said. “Another guy was in a tiny cubbyhole underneath in front, giving directions to the guy driving. For 4 hours!!!”

Bunker said, “I was so impressed with the overall management of this event, moving so many parts, timing, flow, safety, all to maximize attendee enjoyment. As we watched the floats being completed in the warehouse, the sponsors and their volunteers were so dedicated to the theme of the parade: HOPE, but also of the

organizations they were members of, especially the fraternal and social organizations, such as the Odd Fellows, Rotary, several religious entities, service groups. They raise tens of thousands of dollars to support their floats and crews and bring their message to the audiences, there and on television.

“I am so humbled and honored to have been selected to join Patty and represent our department and represent first responders in this event. A once in a lifetime experience. The Odd Fellows and Rebekahs were so generous to have made this possible. “We are in their debt. Their goal was to let us know we are not alone from the effects of our tragedy, they are there for us!

“I must add that I was also happy to return home, to the town I love. California has much to offer, and I enjoyed my visit, but as Dorothy said, “There’s no place like home.” I hail from a town where life is good and people care. I remain a proud and thankful first responder.”

Cormier is thinking about approaching Farmington Rotary or others to do a smaller version of the Rose Bowl parade locally.

“It would be fun,” she said. “We could call it the garden bowl parade!”

Patty Cormier is the Director of the Maine Forest Service. She and her husband, John run Kennebec Home Brew Supplies in Farmington. Steve Bunker, retired from the state Maine 911 Bureau, is a longtime selectman and 1st Vice Commander of the American Legion Post 28 in Farmington.

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