

## A Sign of Respect: Gary Baumgartner Garners Smokejumper Leadership Recognition



When people speak of Gary Baumgartner, the same words keep peppering the conversation: Respect. Leadership. Honor.

Little wonder, then, that the 24-year smokejumper veteran was named the first recipient of the “Al Dunton Smokejumper Leadership Award,” which will be presented to him on May 11 in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Little wonder to anyone, except for Baumgartner himself, who acknowledges his surprise at being selected for the recognition.

“Surprised. Honored. Flattered. All of those,” says Baumgartner. “You can find a handful of people at each smokejumper base who would be deserving. The award could have gone to many other jumpers in Alaska or Boise. It’s definitely an honor that I happened to receive the first award. Al Dunton set the standard for BLM jumpers.”

No one is more deserving than Baumgartner, says Bill Cramer, manager of the BLM Alaska smokejumpers.

“Gary generates respect. We’ve worked closely together for over two decades,” Cramer says. “He is blessed with natural leadership ability. People *want* to follow him.”

Baumgartner’s leadership philosophy is simple: “Treat people well and show them respect. In turn, you earn their respect. It’s easy to lead if people believe in you and trust you.”

The results of that philosophy are apparent within the BLM smokejumper community today. Cramer estimates at least half of the smokejumpers’ current leadership was either hired or trained by Baumgartner, who admits he has a soft spot for the younger jumpers.

“The young jumpers are the heart and soul of our base. They make it click. They’re the workers, the ones with great enthusiasm. They want to do a good job and it’s infectious,” he says.

“The young jumpers look up to him. He’s someone they want to be like,” says Cramer.

Baumgartner’s contributions go beyond the normal call of duty. Take the case of Jedidiah Lusk, a ten-year old boy, the son of former smokejumpers Scott and Cynthia Lusk. Jedidiah was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer in 2010. One of his life’s wishes was to become a smokejumper.

“Many jumpers were involved in Jedidiah’s ‘rookie training,’ but Gary took on the most difficult aspects,” Cramer says. “Gary was instrumental in making that wish come true.”

The result was a trip on the jumpship, where Jedidiah tossed the streamers out the door to gauge wind speed and direction, and later, slapped the jumpers on the shoulder, the signal for them to exit the plane. It was a thrilling experience for the young man.

“Gary developed the mission profile, the procedures, and oversaw the training drills that allowed for a smokejumper mission that was challenging, safe, and memorable for the entire family,” Cramer says. Jedidiah passed away a few months after the flight.

Typically, Baumgartner deflects credit for the success of the mission.

“It was a difficult situation, but the jumpers all joined together and helped him live his dream in that short period of time. It was super-cool to see Jedidiah and witness his strength,” he says.



Cynthia, Jedidiah, and Scott Lusk in the jumpship.

Baumgartner also had a critical role in helping the Alaska jumpers overcome the tragic death of David Liston in 2000 during a training jump.

“Gary tirelessly worked countless hours to identify possible causes, and, more importantly, the technical fixes that would result in a safer, more robust, parachute system,” Cramer recalls. “He was the first person to test-jump the modifications and was instrumental in returning the BLM smokejumpers to operational capacity.”

In short, Baumgartner is a smokejumper’s smokejumper who represents the best in commitment and leadership in the profession. In that sense, he is much like the late Al Dunton, for whom the award is named.

Dunton was a rookie smokejumper in Fairbanks in 1967. He became the base manager from 1972 through 1984, and remained active in fire management for the rest of his distinguished career. Cramer says that the impact of his vision, ideas and inspired leadership carries to the present day. The leadership award was established by the inter-agency smokejumper base managers in conjunction with the National Smokejumper Association.

Al Dunton died in July 2010. His widow, Mary, and his brother, Ron, also a long-time BLM employee in fire and other natural resource positions, will attend the award presentation to Baumgartner.

Two awards will be presented annually, one to a BLM smokejumper and another to a Forest Service smokejumper. The Forest Service recipient this year is Frankie Romero, from the McCall, Idaho, jump base.

“I have a tremendous amount of respect for all jumpers, both in BLM and the Forest Service. I’m a fairly good buddy of Frankie’s. It’s an honor to be acknowledged with him,” Baumgartner says.

Baumgartner’s professional life is changing and smoke-jumping won’t be a part of it.

He recently accepted a job as the BLM’s state aviation manager in Alaska. That means 2012 will be the first season since 1988 that he doesn’t suit up for jumping.

Cramer acknowledges “mixed emotions,” about not having Baumgartner around for the upcoming season, but also says, “You like seeing people move on and make a difference for the whole organization.”

For his part, Baumgartner says, “It was a tough choice. You never look forward to the day when you don’t jump any longer. But I was ready for the change.” He’ll miss the closeness of being part of the smokejumper program.

“Jumping together, working together, camping together. The camaraderie of it all. That’s the best part of it. The jumpers are my extended family,” he says.

But Baumgartner also notes that his new office is next door to the jump base.

And nobody should be surprised if he doesn’t peek out the window with pride and a little bit of longing when the fire call comes in for smokejumpers, just to see how things are going.

The respect works both ways, and new job or not, it’s definitely still there.

*By Don Smurthwaite, National Interagency Fire Center*