'Humbling experience'

By BRIAN WALKER/Staff writer | Posted: Saturday, April 27, 2013 12:00 am

Paying respect to the 12 firefighters killed in last week's fertilizer plant explosion hit home for Kaipo Kuehu and Adam Godwin. The Kootenai County Fire and Rescue employees, who attended Thursday's memorial at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, in which President Barack Obama and other officials spoke, each called the event a "humbling experience."

"We were sent down here to represent our Kootenai County brothers," Godwin said on Friday from Texas. "The hardest part was the lives of many firefighters, including those with young families, were lost. We both have young families. "It was pretty incredible seeing firefighters from all over the U.S. and Canada. It's so important that we support each other and learn from each other."

Godwin, a firefighter, and Kuehu, an engineer, marched to the memorial in a procession of more than 1,000 firefighters that was more than a mile long. There was also an emergency vehicle procession of about 200 rigs. The memorial was 20 miles from the site of the plant explosion in the city of West.

"On a personal level, it reminded me that when I go to work, it may be a day in which I never come home," Kuehu said. "It brings you back to reality. "It's hard not to think about the families who are left behind without a husband, father, brother ... The firefighters down here were honored that we'd make the trip for them."

The ages of the fallen firefighters range from 26 to 52. The firefighters attended the memorial on a volunteer basis. Their expenses, which totaled $1,400, were split evenly between KCFR's firefighter union and KCFR. "Anytime a public servant is lost, the agencies affected are more than just those locally," said Troy Speziale, the union's spokesman. "There is a camaraderie in serving the public and the loss is a burden shouldered by all who serve. We feel blessed to be able to send firefighters to represent our department and thank the cooperation of Kootenai County Fire and Rescue in making this possible."

Godwin and Kuehu said they hope their own agency and others can learn something from the disaster. Kuehu said firefighters have toured the fertilizer plant along Seltice Way in Post Falls, but plan to review it again along with similar facilities.

"Most of the chemicals of concern have been removed from (the Post Falls plant) and they don't carry them there full time," Kuehu said. Interstate 90, a major route where products are transported and inspected, is another area to watch, he said. "With agriculture in our area, the potential for a disaster (involving chemicals) is always there, but not on the magnitude of West, Texas," Kuehu said.

The cause of the blast, which killed three others, hasn't been determined and came two days after bombs exploded during the Boston Marathon.