First-person account

Witnessing pain and resilience after landslide

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But I have never had an assignment as difficult as Oso, Washington, where a devastating landslide destroyed a tight-knit community.

Through my Red Cross training, I’ve learned to help people plan how to rebuild their lives after a disaster. Over time, I’ve also learned ways to help them, and myself, cope with the stress.

But no one taught me how to respond to a big, strong man who cries as he recalls how the mudslide tore apart his neighborhood—the sounds he heard and what he saw as he pried one neighbor, living, out of the rubble and then went on to discover four bodies. With relief, I connected him with a Red Cross volunteer who is an experienced combat psychiatric nurse.

I also struggled when I came across a woman at the Red Cross shelter who was awaiting information about her missing relatives. She pointed at a four-year-old boy blowing bubbles, and said, “That’s my grandson.” I looked her in the eyes and said, “We’re here for you,” before I ran into another room and cried.

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The rest of that day, though, I smiled each time I saw that little boy, laughing and giving his family reason to smile, and giving me a lesson in the resilience of the human spirit.

By the time my two-week commitment in Oso was up, I felt good about what I and the Red Cross had done. And I learned that I can help someone get through pain I can’t even imagine.

The man who cried when he told me his story made me a promise before I left. “When there’s an earthquake in California,” he said, “I’ll be there to help you.”

I believe him.

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Because of your support, Barbara Wood and 43 other Red Cross regional volunteers deployed to assist those affected by the tragic landslide in Oso, Washington.

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Loma Prieta earthquake—25th anniversary

The Loma Prieta earthquake shook Northern California for 15 seconds and caused widespread damage from San Francisco to Monterey County on October 17, 1989. The devastation was so great in Santa Cruz that business owners were not allowed in the downtown area, and helicopters flew in supplies. The only organization allowed into the heavy damaged areas in Santa Cruz and Watsonville was the American Red Cross, which provided warm meals, snacks, beverages and emotional support for the first responders working 18-hour days.

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In Santa Cruz County, the Red Cross helped to fund:
• Grants to rebuild low-income housing and single room occupancy (SRO) dwellings
• Drilling for new wells and repairing water pumps
• Repairs of damaged homes
• Financial assistance to homeowners injured in the quake

Preparing for future quakes

In 1989, the Loma Prieta earthquake was the strongest to shake our area in 83 years. Since then it has been a seismically quiet period. The Loma Prieta quake was not the “Big One.” Experts say Northern California is due for a series of major quakes, which could cause even more damage than in 1989.

Preparedness at home, school and work is crucial. Yet, no matter what happens, no matter what’s lost, the Red Cross will be there.
Having spent much of my childhood in or near Santa Cruz, I was saddened to see the devastation left behind by the Loma Prieta earthquake. I returned to Santa Cruz in 1991, two years after the quake, and opened my law office in the Neary Building on Pacific Avenue—next door to the gaping hole where the Cooper Building once stood. I became a board member for the Downtown Association of Santa Cruz, an organization committed to helping the downtown recover post-quake.

Today, I consider it an honor to be affiliated with the American Red Cross, the organization that brought so much comfort and assistance to those affected by the quake. The Red Cross is committed to helping our community learn ways to prepare for future emergencies and disasters. As we near the 25th anniversary of the earthquake, I hope you will create or review an emergency plan for yourself and your families.

Record-breaking blood drive surpasses goal

The Second Annual American Red Cross Santa Cruz County Chapter Blood Drive set a new record by collecting 29 units of blood. When broken up into its component—red cells, platelets and plasma—the donated blood will enable the Red Cross to assist in saving as many as 87 lives.

KSCO radio personality Ethan Bearman interviewed Red Cross representatives for a two-hour broadcast from the event. The broadcast and Ethan’s on-air blood donation brought in a number of donors, helping the drive finish at 107 percent of its goal.

To schedule an appointment to donate blood, please call 1-800-RED CROSS (1-800-733-2767) or visit reddcrossblood.org

Hug-A-Hero dolls offer support for military families

Just one way the Red Cross assists military family members is with Hug-A-Hero dolls. Recently, the dolls were distributed to children of heroes deployed to assist those affected by the multiple wildfires in Southern California. The dolls feature a picture of a child’s dad or mom, and provide a pillow-like doll to hug while the parent is away. Lillie, 3½, and Hallie, 2, along with their mother, Katherine Blankenship, were delighted with tears of joy after receiving their doll.

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Providing warmth in Washington

Waking up before dawn, Rosilee Croseley and Ellen “Tiki” Dellamora would drive a Red Cross mobile feeding unit to two different locations to collect supplies before setting out to the site of the Oso, Washington landslide.

The two veteran volunteers of the American Red Cross Santa Cruz County Chapter have been at the scenes of some of the nation’s most tragic disasters, including local responses at the Loma Prieta earthquake and San Bruno explosion. But the March 22 landslide, which killed 42 people with one person still missing, has left the biggest impact.

“Emotionally, this was the hardest deployment I have ever been on,” said Rosilee. At the site of the landslide, Tiki and Rosilee delivered hot water and coffee to a Red Cross tent set up for rescue workers. The hot drinks provided warmth in an otherwise cold, damp and mud-sealed environment. Even with gloves on, Tiki said, “I couldn’t feel my hands after five minutes.”

“And yet, despite the cold, these people were digging through the freezing mud—sometimes using their hands,” she said of the search and rescue workers.

“Their faces were so peaceful and kind,” Rosilee said. “They were so committed to finding all of the missing.”

Keeping each other motivated

Tiki and Rosilee had bonded during a previous response, while assisting those affected by the Big Sur Pfeiffer Fire at the end of 2013. Having someone to lean on enabled the women to work through freezing mud—sometimes using their hands,” she said of the search and rescue workers.

For Tiki, small things outside of the disaster zone—a smiling child, a handmade card, sunshine—kept her grounded.

“I am honored to be asked to go,” Tiki said. “I’m just so proud to be part of the Red Cross. I know, in my own way, I gave what I could.”

To learn more about volunteer opportunities, please visit redcross.org

Red Cross volunteer Liz Schroeder, left, and Santa Cruz County Chapter volunteer Rosilee Croseley delivers fresh coffee to searchers and emergency workers at the site of the landslide in Snohomish, WA.

“First comes the beauty, and then comes the kindness,” Tiki said. “I couldn’t feel my hands after five minutes.”

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