

“IT CAN’T HAPPEN TO ME”
Michael S. Williams

*“It can't
It can't happen to me
I got an angel watching over me
It can't
It can't happen to me
It's always someone else, you see
It can't
Can't happen to me
It can't happen to me”*

-Charlie Major
The Other Side Album

Recently I was a guest host on KZSB *Voices of Santa Barbara*, a program about local issues and events. The guest was former Ventura resident and school teacher Judy Dobbins, now a resident of Wisconsin. She recently returned from Tom’s River High School across from the Pine Belt Arena in New Jersey.

She told a fascinating story about her experience as a Red Cross volunteer shelter worker; a story that we should all learn from because a day may come when we find ourselves in one.

Hurricane Sandy is the second largest Atlantic storm in the history of the United States, surpassed only by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. From Florida to Maine twenty-four states were significantly impacted by this Category 2 hurricane that killed at least 185 people and injured countless others.

To date, there is a reported loss of over \$20 billion in property loss and an estimated business interruption loss of over \$50 billion.

As recovery efforts continue in the Northeast, Sandy also had a profound impact in Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Bahamas. Millions of dollars of damage, lives lost and property destroyed gave advanced notice to the US to get ready for a large and demanding storm.

Despite the advanced warnings from the weather service and emergency managers throughout the east coast, thousands of people failed to evacuate. Judy said that most of the storm victims she interacted with were unprepared for the hurricane, failed to evacuate when ordered to do so and were woefully unprepared for shelter life.

From her perspective, the prevailing attitude of evacuees was “This just couldn’t happen...they refused to evacuate. It doesn’t happen to me. This does not happen in New Jersey.” Needless to say, it can, it will and it did.

In advance of the storm, the Red Cross deployed supplies including cots, water and food. It was all put to use as hundreds of evacuees, unprepared for the storm or being displaced for extended periods arrived asking for help.

Judy was dispatched to New Jersey as part of a 40 member team of Red Cross volunteers. This was her first adventure as a shelter worker. Her memories will last forever.

The evacuees included seniors, young families with children, drug addicts including heroin users on methadone, disabled and mentally challenged patients as well as registered sex offenders.

Judy said there were “well-to-do people, but they lost everything.” Reflecting for a moment she added “It was a challenge beyond anything I have ever undertaken.”

Housing for evacuees was profoundly limited because of extensive storm damage. Local motels were already full. Electricity and telephone services were limited. Rental cars were unavailable. Many other vehicles were destroyed because few thought to move them to high ground prior to the storm. Local transportation systems and services were inoperable.

Being prepared for an emergency does matter. Many evacuees were at best ready to be displaced for only a few hours. Some required dialysis, oxygen or advanced medical care. Most brought no clothing, food or personal medication. They did however bring their pets. This became a challenge for shelter workers as they dealt with birds, dogs, cats and even a snake.

The power was out for three days leaving the school without heat. While they had showers, the water was cold. Red Cross blankets were the primary source of warmth.

Shelter security quickly became an issue. Illicit drug use and thefts were problematic. People causing disruptions had to be ejected. In time, the National Guard was assigned to supplement local law enforcement. Their “high profile and patrolling” helped keep order. According to Judy, “Without them, it would have been a different situation.”

Special accommodations had to be created for two babies that were born at the shelter: Storm and Sandy. These infants brought inspiration to many of the members of their extended shelter family.

With little notice a local hospital evacuated many of their patients into the shelter. This created new challenges as people needing advanced care entered into the eclectic environment.

The evacuation shelter itself had to be moved twice. The first move was from the school to “Tent City” at a local race track during a blizzard. The new encampment was cold, wet and snowy. Fortunately, the evacuees were moved again to a more suitable location the next day.

FEMA and AmeriCorps met with each resident to help with short-term housing. The goal is to close a shelter as soon as possible, but here there were very limited options.

As is generally the case during emergencies, public information was limited if non-existent. Describing the issue Judy said: “We did not get a lot - no good communications - no television - not much information to be had.” She added that “local community members” tried to fill the void causing additional problems in the process.

Regarding what to do during a disaster, Judy was specific: “Have a plan! What are we going to do?” She added, “You definitely want to avoid the shelter experience anyway possible.”

Why does a New Jersey Red Cross shelter matter here in Santa Barbara? Everything. The lessons learned from what happened at Tom’s River with over a week of advanced notice are important for all of us.

What do you suppose will happen when California has “the big one” with no warning? Without question, we will have the same issues to contend with - water, electricity, communications, crime, medical needs, large scale evacuations and necessity for evacuation shelters.

Now is the time to get active with an organization that provides disaster support such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, food banks, church groups, AmeriCorps or the Medical Reserve Corps. Many local public agencies such as police and fire departments have volunteer organizations you can join. Volunteering is a terrific and rewarding way to give back to the community.

Within your immediate community you can get involved with CERT - Community Emergency Response Team training to help support local disaster response and recovery. Most importantly, you can prepare yourself and your family for emergencies.

To the over 500 homeless and 92 animals Judy became known as “Earth Angel Judy.” Despite the stresses and challenges, Judy said with enthusiasm, “I met the most wonderful people I have ever met - it bonds you forever,” adding, “It was the most rewarding volunteering position I have ever been in.”

“It can’t happen to me.” Oh yes it can. Are you ready?

Santa Barbara County Public Health Department and the Medical Reserve Corps.
Free flu vaccinations for all community members 2 years and older
NOVEMBER 28th

3 p.m. – 7 p.m.
Goleta Valley Community Center
5679 Hollister Ave.

For further information call 346-8420 or visit sbcpd.org