

**AMERICAN RED CROSS**  
**Michael S. Williams**

*“There aren’t any great men. There are just great challenges that ordinary men like you and me are forced by circumstances to meet.”*

Admiral William Frederick Halsey, Jr.  
United States Navy

March is American Red Cross Month. First proclaimed in 1943 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, it is a time to remind everyone within the community of the work the American Red Cross does and how you can help support their efforts.

My first introduction to the American Red Cross was as a young child when my mother worked as a “Gray Lady” at a local hospital. I remember her long grey and white dress with the square Red Cross patch on the shoulder and an array of pens adorning her collar.

On the early morning of October 30th, 1967, our family quickly awoke to a bright orange sky, embers flying about like lighting bugs and our neighbor’s houses on fire. The Paseo Grande Fire from Riverside County was racing through the hills of Tustin with a vengeance. The wind driven fire took the life of one woman and injured at least nine others, burned 47,639 acres, destroyed 66 homes and caused millions of dollars of damage before it was contained on November 22nd. I remember the American Red Cross was there in force supporting the community.

Later, I would take American Red Cross first aid classes, various water safety and lifeguarding classes. CPR was introduced in a large scale in the early 1970’s and it was the American Red Cross that took the point in teaching the public how to save a life. In time, I would become an instructor for many of these important programs.

Most everyone reading this has their own memories and stories involving the American Red Cross. Many have been benefactors of the organizations many services and programs. Indeed, as philanthropic organizations go, the American Red Cross is one of the oldest and well established in the country. But who are they?

Pioneer, humanitarian, teacher and US Patent Clerk Clara Barton and a “circle of acquaintances” founded the American Red Cross in Washington, DC on May 21, 1881. Clara had already been recognized for her efforts supporting soldiers in the field during the Civil War. She was 60 when she started the organization and continued as its leader for 23 years.

While in Europe following the Civil War Clara was inspired by the Swiss International Red Cross Movement. Upon her return, she was successful in campaigning for the formation of the American Red Cross and ultimately its ratification at the Geneva Convention to protect war victims. The United States later ratified the agreement in 1882.

The American Red Cross was first congressionally chartered in 1900. A second charter was signed in 1905 and remains in effect today.

The American Red Cross introduced first aid, water safety and public health nursing programs to the United States. World War I caused a massive growth to the organization. They gave aid to veterans and expanded into staffing hospitals and ambulance companies. They helped recruit over 20,000 registered nurses to serve the military. It was American Red Cross nurses that came forward to help the 1918 worldwide influenza epidemic.

Following the war, the organization developed nutrition and safety programs, accident prevention training and home care for the sick. They also provided major disaster assistance to victims of disasters such as the 1927 Mississippi River floods, severe droughts and the Depression. These disaster services continue today at no charge to anyone in need.

The American Red Cross was called into service again for World War II. They enrolled more than 104,000 nurses for military service. They provided over 27 million packages for American and Allied prisoners of war and shipped over 300,000 tons of supplies. Remarkably, they also collected over 13.3 million pints of blood for use by the armed forces. This gave birth to the nationwide civilian blood program that still serves many communities throughout the United States.

The American Red Cross continues to support the military, their families and the community to this day. Their education and training programs are used by millions of people. The American Red Cross works with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and serves as its principal supplier of mass care in federally declared disasters.

While the American Red Cross has helped millions upon millions of people since 1882, it is now in need of your help. Nationwide, the American Red Cross responds to over 70,000 disasters a year providing shelter, food and other necessities to those affected. They depend upon private and corporate financial support. These funds support their public education mission, disaster services, relief and shelter services and training programs.

Locally, the Santa Barbara County Chapter has provided profound support to the community over the decades. The fires, floods and landslides have all impacted our community and it was the American Red Cross that was there every time to provide aid to those in needs.

Santa Barbara County Chapter Executive Director Julie McGovern recently said “I am proud to work for an organization that is known as the most far-reaching and effective humanitarian organization in the world. The Red Cross continues to serve those in need – whether it is in our backyard or half-way across the world. Because our staff and volunteers train and drill regularly, they are ready to serve at a moment’s notice. Without the generous support of our donors and volunteers, none of what we do would be possible, and we are deeply humbled by their involvement and dedication.”

The American Red Cross was founded by a woman who saw a need, took charge, and made it happen. It is ordinary people like you and me that make up the American Red Cross. You can join the effort to “Support us” by getting involved by volunteering, providing a donation, enrolling in a class, or just giving a helping hand. For further information on how you can get involved, visit [sbredcross.org](http://sbredcross.org) or call the chapter at 687-1331. Are you ready?