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Lamorinda Prepares to Face Disaster

By Sophie Braccini



CERT volunteers being debriefed by Gordon Nathan Photo Andy Scheck

"At approximately 06:45-hours on October 25th, Lamorinda experienced an 8.1 earthquake.... Roads leading into and out of the area are closed due to damaged pavement, and power lines blocking some major roads.... You receive word, via a "runner" from the Lamorinda Disaster Coordinator that all available CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) members are requested to report to the Moraga Commons Park for staging and await further instructions."

And on that day at 08:00-hours, 100 CERT volunteers gathered at the Moraga Commons, to participate in the first tri-city drill organized by CERT in cooperation with the police departments, the fire district, and other agencies.

For efficient emergency response, the circulation of information is critical. Volunteers were bombarded with one incident after another of all magnitude: an injured person somewhere in town, a car leaking gas in the street, or an apartment building collapsing nearby. The command center received notice, allocated resources and documented its actions. One of the key teams that morning was the medical center. Areas had been set up to triage victims depending on the level of their injuries: a green tarp for minor, yellow for serious but not life threatening, red for requires immediate attention and a black tarp marked the morgue area.

Earlier that morning another 70 volunteers had come to be made up as victims and were ready to be rescued. Ben Thomas, a freshman at Campolindo and member of Boy Scout troop 212 had volunteered. "When we arrived we each chose the scenario to play out," said Thomas, who had a pole go through his chest.

"The triage team identified me as immediate and I was dispatched to the red tarp," he said. He was then directed to an ambulance. Thomas was lucky there was an ambulance, "If there is an incident of this magnitude here," said Moraga Chief

of Police Mark Ruppenthal, "roads might be closed and evacuation impossible. You might be looking at two weeks before any public agency shows up."

The importance of self-reliance was constantly reinforced. "You might have only one or two police officers on duty when something happens," said Lieutenant Robert Priebe, "and we are lucky that some of the Public Works people live close by." Dan Bernie's Public Works team was there and manifested their presence and efficiency, interfacing with CERT volunteers and flying from incident to incident to bring help.

CERT's Gordon Nathan, who was instrumental in the preparation of the drill, described the 3 objectives of the training: "1- Organization, 2- Communication, 3- Interfacing with public agencies." During the debriefing that followed, the volunteers were rated a 6 (out of 10): They did a good job, but there was room for improvement.

"I was very impressed by the turn out and how people immediately got involved," said a Lieutenant from the Orinda Police Department, "I saw a bit of temper flaring and some uncertainty regarding specific skills, but on the whole it was a good experience."

The next CERT training will start on February 5th 2009; go to lamorindacert.org for more information.

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