

Not My Fault: Please come to the (virtual) fair

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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For twenty years, the Humboldt County Fair was a big part of my summer. We started going to the fair in 1980. Kids enjoyed rides, our daughter had a grand champion guinea pig and we always liked the animals. But in 1999, my role changed from visitor to exhibitor with the first Earthquake-Tsunami Room.

It wasn't my idea. The Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group (RCTWG) had formed in 1996 for the express purpose of better understanding the threats posed by a great earthquake and tsunami on the Cascadia subduction zone, developing outreach efforts and communicating preparedness information to the public. We had developed the Living on Shaky Ground magazine and other materials, but needed ways to push the information out.

Someone in the RCTWG suggested the County Fair as a platform. We had done a small fair exhibit in 1992, sharing a room with the FEMA crew responding to the Cape Mendocino earthquakes and that probably put the idea in someone's head. In 1999, the Fair association allowed us to use the large room on the south side of Hindley Hall and the RCTWG Earthquake-Tsunami Room was born.

It was an experience to switch from visitor to exhibitor. It was also a lot of work. Vicki Ozaki of Redwood National & State Parks and I made posters about tsunamis. Vicki found a wave tank lurking in an HSU basement and convinced the Engineering Department to loan it to us for a display. They had built it for a coastal engineering class but it didn't work well for their purposes. They didn't realize they had made a perfect tsunami wave tank, the two side-by-side chambers providing an excellent way to illustrate how tsunami wave speed depended on water depth. And best of all, it was kid proof. They could turn the crank as hard as they could and nothing would spill or tip.

We set up a Tsunami Theater with an old VHS projection system and I grabbed a number of teaching videos to play. We had a new edition of the Living on Shaky Ground magazine and Red Cross and California's Office of

Emergency Services provided other materials to give away. The best decision we made was having RCTWG volunteers staff the room. I spent nearly every day at the fair that year and learned as much as any visitor. Listening to people's concerns and answering questions changed my perspective on what people knew and what worried them.

We didn't keep track of the number of people visiting the room in the early years, but it was clearly a success. There were almost always people in the room with rush hours right after Midway shows and when the horse racing was over. We had done many outreach and preparedness fairs before with generally low participation. The County Fair was the perfect venue – people are in the mood to see everything and from later surveys, we estimated about 40% of fair visitors made at least a quick run through the room.

We returned in 2000, using the 300th anniversary of the 1700 Cascadia earthquake as our theme. The theater and wave tank came back and we added an old smoked paper drum seismograph. This became the format for the next 18 years. We chose a theme – in 2005 it was the Indian Ocean tsunami and in 2006 the 100th anniversary of the San Francisco earthquake. For several years we had smaller exhibits at the Del Norte and Mendocino County Fairs. When the California Office of Emergency Services began supporting RCTWG efforts, we were able to make fancier posters and hire student assistants, but the basic format remained the same. We always had a RCTWG volunteer in the room and we always emphasized making it a fun, positive experience.

And then came COVID. Our last in-person RCTWG meeting was the first week in March. We were still thinking Tsunami Week would happen and 2020 fair planning was moving forward. By the middle of the month it was clear we were in a brave new world and nothing would go on as usual. Tsunami Week was cancelled and a few months later, so was the Humboldt County Fair.

But not our fair. Tomorrow, a new era in RCTWG Earthquake-Tsunami Fairs will debut, virtually. Please be one of our first guests at <https://rctwg.humboldt.edu/virtual-fair>

Just like our former fairs, you can still enter our room and I am there to greet you. Ten balloons mark locations with more information. Just a simple click will take you to an interactive display of Humboldt County's new tsunami hazard maps and another click to real-time earthquake information. You can relax in our virtual tsunami theater and bring your children to the Kid's Corner and hear the

heartwarming story of Kamome, the little boat that connected children in Japan and Crescent City. We've even got a link to Humboldt's own tsunami boat, the Tai Shou Maru that spent more than three years traveling across the Pacific after the 2011 tsunami before beaching at Dry Lagoon.

We hope you will do more than just browse. Balloon #4 has important preparedness trips including easy ways to sign up for emergency notification, ShakeOut and California Earthquake Alerts. Download brochures and other materials for you to take home at Balloon #9. You can even take a trip into the past with our archives of past RCTWG fair displays at #10.

No it isn't quite the same. I would still prefer to talk to all of you in person and experience the wonderful give and take of face-to-face interaction. But I think you will still find our virtual fair to be worth spending some time visiting. And you can still ask me questions – it just might take a little more time to get your virtual answer back.

All of our fairs, whether real or virtual, are the cumulative effort of many members of the Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group. And all of us will be under our respective tables and desks this Thursday for ShakeOut. Please join us wherever you may be.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. All Not My Fault columns are archived at <https://www2.humboldt.edu/kamome/resources> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu for questions/comments about this column, or to request a free copy of the North Coast preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground."
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