

Not My Fault: Education, your actions help keep you and yours secure

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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Another hurricane in the news. Michael is now estimated to have claimed 46 lives, including 32 in the US. No sooner than the winds began to abate and rainfall lessened, the finger pointing started. “No food, No FEMA: Hurricane Michael’s Survivors are Furious” spouted the Daily Beast (Oct. 13). “Desperate Hurricane Michael Survivors Ask: When is Help Coming?” The Weather Channel (Oct. 14).

It’s rough being in the midst of a major disaster. Information is difficult to obtain and the situation may be chaotic. Basic necessities such as safe drinking water, food, and shelter are in short supply. It’s natural to look for a culprit to blame. And while hurricanes are one thing we don’t need to fret about on the North Coast, we could find ourselves in a similar boat after a major earthquake, winter storm or flood.

You might not want to hear this – but the primary responsibility for preparing lies in our own laps. That isn’t to say government and non-governmental organizations don’t play important roles, but it starts with us. It is our collective will that determines priorities for emergency response, zoning, building codes and other systems that may seem a burden in normal times but become important when nature strikes. And it is our awareness and understanding of what to do ahead of time and the right way to respond that can make the difference between inconvenience and significant personal loss.

One photograph from Hurricane Michael caught my attention. It showed the devastation in the Florida town of Mexico Beach. Blocks of homes are leveled and two large apartment units are badly damaged. But in the foreground, almost unscathed, is a three-story house. Dr. LeBron Lackey who built the home was concerned about hurricanes and designed the structure with deep pilings and extra reinforcement to withstand forces even greater than what the Florida building codes required.

The photo made clear that, with extra expense and care, it is possible to build structures to withstand hurricane force winds. But this wasn’t my favorite part of the story.

Even though his house was well engineered – he had no intentions of riding out the storm with an evacuation order in place, “You aren’t a hero if you stay. The first responders who come to clean up are the heroes.”

There was no question that Michael was going to be a ferocious storm. Regional media pushed out alerts on radio, television, electronically and in print. And yet some people were not as wise as Dr. Lackey. There are several reasons why people don’t evacuate. Some don’t have the ability to leave. Some don’t get the information – they may not be linked in to the media channels, speak another language or don’t understand what is being said. This is a community problem – better planning and educational materials are needed.

But perhaps the largest group of people who stay don’t perceive themselves to be at risk. They may have experienced other hurricanes that authorities said would be bad but turned out not to affect them, they may distrust expert opinions, or they just don’t want to leave their home, the place that is their refuge and their largest personal asset. The media tends to glamorize this group. Before every storm they feature interviews with the hardy individuals who buck both nature and expert opinion by staying in place. And afterwards, they can usually find a few to talk with breathless excitement about their experience. But there is nothing glamorous about the cost of money and time first responders expend in assessing their safety and rescuing them.

There are many things that can be done to reduce a hurricane’s impact. Hindsight is always 20-20. What if Florida strengthened their building codes and required all structures to be built to the design specifications that Dr. Lackey used? Not everyone is a big fan of regulations, and changing codes means increases the cost of building. But it is an important conversation that states in the hurricane belt are having.

The low hanging fruit is improving preparedness education. Every California high school requires students to take a health class. What is more important to health than keeping you and your family safe in storms, earthquakes, floods and wildfires? If every ninth or tenth grader were aware of how our emergency response system worked, they might be more likely to understand alert notifications and why an evacuation order should be followed.

We live in earthquake country and earthquakes don’t give warnings beforehand. But education and personal preparedness are just as important. Like Dr. Lackey, we

can build structures to withstand natural forces, whether its wind or vibrations. Educating everyone about reducing hazards and what to do when the ground starts shaking is essential.

If you are reading this Thursday morning, here is something you can do today. It won't cost you a penny and you don't even need to leave your home or office. Join with me and 10 million other Californians in The Great ShakeOut. Set your watch to 10:18am or listen to 90.5 FM to hear a drill broadcast. Drop down to the ground if you can safely do so, cover your neck and head with your arm, and, if a sturdy table or desk is nearby, slide under it and hold on. If you are in a tsunami zone, consider adding evacuating to high ground after the pretend shaking stops. More information at shakeout.org. And give yourself a little pat on the back for knowing the most important thing to do in an earthquake.

Preparedness tip of the week: We are all stronger with community backup. Join with neighbors to make your neighborhood safer. Already part of a Neighborhood Watch group? Consider adding emergency preparedness to your activities. Who has special needs, who has pets or animals that might need care if roads and bridges are disrupted? Does someone have special skills such as medical training or machine operation? You might be surprised by all of the expertise in your immediate neighborhood.

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