

Not My Fault: Grading the ShakeOut – How well did we do?

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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A standing ovation to all of you who didn't stand on Thursday – who got down on their knees and slid under tables and chairs. I'm finding it not as easy to do as I once did, but I still made it under the dining room table. Yes it feels a bit silly and awkward and Ruby the dog decided something must be very wrong seeing me in her spot. She would only join me after a salami bribe.

It may look silly but it's not. Each time I participate in ShakeOut, I am reinforcing a new instinct in my brain – to DROP, COVER and HOLD ON and not run out the door when the ground starts to shake. And this year, there was an added incentive. The California Office of Emergency Services used the ShakeOut as an opportunity to test the MyShake Earthquake Warning App. The over one million people who have the App got an audible message at 10:15 am last Thursday that it was ShakeOut time and this was only a test.

I don't know exactly how many people took part in Thursday's ShakeOut. This is the 12th year the entire State has held the ShakeOut drill. Shakeout.org encourages people to register their intent to participate and keeps tabs of registrants in different categories such as K-12 schools, businesses, non-profits, media and so forth. In 2020, 6.6 million Californians were on the registration list.

This year, like previous years, the top participant sector was K-12 schools. Many school districts register all staff and students at the beginning of the school year. This year over 60% of all ShakeOut registrants were students and staff at K-12 schools. The second largest group was Colleges and Universities, accounting for another 12.5% of the total.

Many California schools have practiced earthquake drills long before ShakeOut. I recently got a note from someone who remembered getting under his desk in 1950s Arcata earthquake drills. The Katz Act of 1984 mandated that California public and private schools develop earthquake response plans and reduce hazards. In 2013, the State's education code was amended to mandate earthquake drills in all K-12 schools.

This long tradition of school drills has paid off. My first preparedness study was in 1987 after the Whittier Narrows M5.9 earthquake. Vivien Gratton from the Lawrence Hall of Science and I spent a week interviewing teachers and staff in the LA basin on how the earthquake affected them. The earthquake occurred just before most classes had started but staff and children were on campus, in libraries, meeting with teachers and on playgrounds. We heard stories of how teachers and students quickly got under or next to tables and desks. Eight people died in the earthquake and 200 injuries were reported, but only a few minor injuries were tallied at schools. We learned of one school where high school students jammed into a doorway, causing minor scrapes and bruises. This was an eye opener for me, the first time I became convinced that heading to a doorway was not a good idea.

The last strong North Coast earthquake was on a Saturday afternoon in January 2010. Once again we learned that kids generally did the right thing and many adults did not. Nicole Bowles a Fortuna High sophomore wrote of her experiences in a letter to the Times-Standard:

“ I am 15 years old and was in the Bayshore Mall food court with my friend Shelby when it (the earthquake) hit. My friend and I immediately remembered what we had been taught since kindergarten, and dove under the table. The floor shook, panels and glass began to fall from the ceiling, and people were running about. Afraid for the chaotic people to get hurt, we shouted for them to get down. We continued to yell for them to get under their tables, and didn't stop until some had listened to us. It felt like forever, but was only about five or 10 seconds. People were screaming and running out of the building and dodging falling ceiling panels.

I find it odd that the only two people who knew what to do were the two high school sophomores. We stayed under our table until we were told to exit the building, and found the rest of the people we were with. “

Not everyone was in earshot of Nicole and Shelby's sage advice. Eight ambulance calls were made that day to the Bayshore Mall, all from injuries caused by people running while the ground was shaking. Several mall security people exacerbated the situation by running themselves and encouraging patrons to do likewise.

I was part of a briefing for Governor Schwarzenegger three day's later when he visited to survey the damage and I recounted how children were more likely to do the

right thing than adults. He remembered what I said and used it in his weekly Governor's radio address that can still be found on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ymellp1XCY>

ShakeOut registrations were down in 2020 both statewide and on the North Coast. This was no surprise. We have so many other things going on right now – the pandemic, fires, and a very contentious election. School registrations alone were down by over two million compared to 2019. This doesn't worry me at all. My guess is that many people and organizations just didn't have the energy to sign up on the website. I know you have been listening to me and you were with me under the table as I tried to entice Ruby with that bit of salami. In my book, you all get an A+.

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