

## **Not My Fault: Thank you, Cindy Henderson, for your service to the public**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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I closed my column last week with a plea to be a helper in emergencies and disasters. Today I recognize Cindy Henderson, recently retired head of the Del Norte County Office of Emergency Services. For nearly 13 years, Cindy has worked tirelessly to build resiliency throughout Del Norte County and is a model in 'helping' for all of us.

Emergency managers are unsung heroes in my book. What does an emergency manager do? Most of the time push paper, argue with city officials about resources, develop plans, train personnel, and develop relationships among the many agencies and stakeholders who will have to work together as a well-oiled machine in times of disaster. Ninety-nine percent of the time it seems like low priority stuff for the vast majority of people. But when a real emergency arises, there are no opportunities for rehearsals or second chances.

Troy Nicolini of the Eureka NWS Forecast Office has seen Cindy in action through a number of emergency events. "Cindy puts everything she has into building relationships in between disasters so that those relationships would be there when it counted. At the end of the day, when you call someone at 2:00 a.m. with rain pouring down and rivers rising, it makes a world of difference when you have mutual trust and you know with the person on the other end of the line."

I first met Cindy in 2007 about six months after the 2006 tsunami had destroyed half of the Crescent City harbor. The county had just made the emergency management position full time and Cindy, who was working in Public Health at the time (during the bird flu scare), threw her hat in the ring after realizing that pandemic emergencies could not be siloed into one agency, and needed to be approached as a disaster planning issue with all departments in the County at the table.

At the beginning, Cindy's heart was in the health arena and it took her a little while to wrap her head around natural disasters. But one thing that stands out about Cindy is having an open mind and a willingness to tackle new problems. I think the 'aha moment' came as we

were putting together tsunami evacuation maps in the county and she recognized that disasters were the ultimate health emergency. Not only did she fully embrace planning for floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis head on, she was able to secure preparedness funding from the California Department of Public Health, an innovative and previously untapped source of disaster preparedness funding.

Tsunamis were a big part of the Del Norte disaster-planning world in 2007. The 2004 Indian Ocean and the 2006 Kuril Islands tsunami represented the opposite ends of the hazard spectrum – the huge subduction zone tsunami that could arrive at nearby locations within as little as ten minutes and the relatively modest tsunami from far away that could produce currents still strong enough to tear up a harbor many hours later. From her first day in the office, Cindy recognized that disaster management was not just about the technology of getting alerts and protocols or a neatly printed disaster plan sitting on a shelf. Outreach, education, communication and building networks would be the cornerstone of her tenure.

This meant new programs and approaches. Cindy initiated Prepare Del Norte as a web-based information portal for all public health and disaster information. Next came Neighbors Helping Neighbors, reinforcing the message that the people most likely to help in a disaster may live next door and with a little training and organization, can be an effective resource.

Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group Co-Chair Kerry Sherin, said of the program, "The Neighbors Helping Neighbors program that Cindy and others implemented was amazing - a doable and effective course that was all laid out for residents to follow step-by-step to prepare their local pocket in the community. Cindy has a grasp of the big picture in the case of a community-wide disaster, as well as having on-the-ground knowledge of the people and geography of her area."

Cindy's efforts and programs have regional, state and national recognition. Jodi Traversero, head of the Coastal Region of the State Office of Emergency Services, works with emergency managers from 16 counties and 151 cities (including those in the populous Bay Area) considers Cindy a role model. "Cindy Henderson embodies the very values we look for in these occupations. She is a fierce advocate for Del Norte County and an extremely effective motivator and influencer for broad and deep levels of disaster preparedness and response actions. Her humility and expertise shine. She brought resources and

recognition to Del Norte. She held that torch and inspired thousands.”

Cindy won't like being singled out for recognition in this column. She would be the first to say it is all a team effort and she often took a back seat. That may be true, but Cindy was the team builder and was the inspiration for bringing everyone together. From Troy Nicolini, “Cindy made everyone feel like they wanted to participate in preparing their agency. She did this by creating a constructive, no fault environment where everyone could learn without fear of failure.”

Cindy leaves big shoes to fill, but she has built a solid framework for the next Emergency Manager to build on. Del Norte County may be small by the numbers, but it is big in the emergency management world.

Preparedness tip of the week: Visit the Prepare Del Norte Web site <https://preparedelnorte.com/index.html> . If you live in Del Norte County, get involved in the Neighbors Helping Neighbors program. If you live elsewhere, see what is available in your county and what can be adapted to work in your area.

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