

Not My Fault: You can be heroes – on International Tsunami Day

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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This Sunday November 5 is World Tsunami Awareness Day. The day was first recognized by the UN General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015 to promote a global culture of tsunami awareness. In the spirit of Tsunami Day, Here are stories of tsunami heroes and heroines. They include the young and the older, the tourist and the professional.

On December 26, 2004, Tilly Smith was ten years old and holiday at Maikhao Beach on Phuket Island, Thailand with her parents and younger sister. The British schoolgirl observed the ocean suddenly changing in character and, having studied about tsunamis two week previously in her geography class, thought it looked like the video she had seen of the 1946 tsunami in Hawaii. She told her parents she thought a tsunami was coming. At first they didn't believe her but she became even more determined that her assessment was correct. The family told other people on the beach to evacuate and the hotel manager (from Japan) told everyone to go to the upper floors of buildings. She is credited with saving the lives of 100 people. You can hear her recount the experience at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0yrONL1Q3g>

I met Aveo Faausu Fonoti, Mayor of Amanave two weeks after the 2009 Samoa tsunami. He told our group how he had attended a workshop about tsunamis for town mayors on American Samoa only a few weeks beforehand and remembered being told that long-duration ground shaking was a natural warning. In the early morning He ran through the village blowing the bullhorn and alerting residents to the danger. Some people tried to ignore him but he was insistent. Although 80% of the buildings in his village were destroyed, no one died and no one was seriously injured.

When I visited Amanave, it was bustling with activity. People were busy repairing damaged structures, children were playing and there was almost a festive atmosphere. The neighboring town of Poloa had not been so fortunate and several people perished. Not as many structures had been destroyed in Poloa, but the whole community was in mourning over the human loss.

Abby Wutzler, aged 10, was also in Samoa in 2009. The New Zealand fourth grader was on holiday with her family when she noticed the ocean was withdrawing. She had also been taught about the natural warning signs of a tsunami in school and ran up and down the beach yelling that a tsunami was coming. "I remember looking under my arms and seeing all these trees just crushing and being crushed in the brown water, just swirling around and killing everything in sight," she recounted. Many other tourists credit Abby's warning with saving their lives. For her life-saving efforts, she was presented with a certificate of commendation by New Zealand's Ministry of Civil Defense. Her schoolmates in Wellington gave her the nickname TAG – for Tsunami Alert Girl.

Martina Marturana lives on Robinson Crusoe Island about 380 miles off the coast of Chile. In the early morning hours of February 27, 2010, Martina felt a slight tremor that lasted a long time. In Chile, most schools teach about the relation between earthquakes and tsunamis and the 12-year-old was concerned and told her father. They called her uncle in Northern Chile who told them a massive earthquake had just occurred. She looked out the window and noticed the boats in the harbor moving in an unusual way, and ran to ring an alarm bell in the town square. A tsunami as high as fifty feet swept over much of the town. Eight people died in her village but she is credited with saving over 600!

Radio Bio Bio, a commercial radio station in Concepción Chile, was a different sort of hero in the 2010 Chile earthquake and tsunami. The director of the station was a civil engineer by training with a long interest in preparedness. For a number of years before the 2010 earthquake he was concerned that a strong quake could happen soon had been hardening his station, making sure it would structurally resist strong shaking, getting generators and emergency supplies and making sure that the broadcasting equipment and non-structural elements were secure.

The preparedness actions paid off – the studio suffered no damage in the February M 8.8 earthquake and was back on the air within 20 minutes. The station went to information sharing 24 - 7 – no ads and no music. When a listener called in to see if someone could locate a needed prescription, the station became an informal connector of the medically needy to the needed supplies. When people couldn't find a loved one, the station broadcast the information widely. When a large aftershock occurred a week later, even the Navy realized that the quickest way to get their tsunami message out to the public was via Radio Bio Bio. When our reconnaissance team visited

Chile two weeks after the earthquake, everyone wanted to talk about the role the radio station had played. And no surprise, their listening audience more than doubled in the wake of the disaster.

So this November 5th think about how you would respond when a large earthquake happens here. Maybe you will be the next tsunami hero/heroine – or perhaps your son or daughter. When it comes to earthquakes and tsunamis, they might know more than you do.

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