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So you think you are ready for a disaster? Don't be so sure...

Learning from the Seaside Public Library Experience

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At the Seaside Public Library we are aware of the potential for natural and man-made disasters in our community and have planned accordingly. We have planned for earthquakes. We have planned for tsunamis. We have planned for spring break “disturbances,” better known as riots (a term flatly discouraged by the city). We have mapped out evacuation routes to escape any ninety foot tsunami wave o’ horror approaching from the west. We have pinpointed sites for emergency community cache barrels full of bottled water, blankets and energy bars. And yes, we have actually taste tested the aforesaid energy bars to make sure they are palatable and nutritious.

The entire town has participated in annual evacuation drills, marching to get to high ground in the allotted twenty minutes assuming, of course, we are not swallowed up like houseflies in the liquefaction process. We have created emergency command centers and all of us have NOAA weather radios. Most of us carry emergency packs in our cars, and a few who are really smug, have life jackets in their trunks. You’d think we were ready for anything, but you’d be wrong. Why? Because over the last five years of all this planning for any eventuality, one thing remains true: the emergency that happens is not the emergency you expected.

Take, for instance, the big windstorm of December 2007. This storm was actually a series of three storms hitting Oregon and Washington, bringing winds, bigger winds, and finally hurricane force winds that seemed eternal. Huge swaths of forest blew down over most roads and cut Seaside off from the rest of the world. There were

so many trees down that the entire area resembled the Siberian Tunguska event. If that wasn’t enough, landslides and flooding turned local communities into mosh pits of mud and slime. We had no power; we had no communication. Phone and Internet service was down, cell towers were inoperable, satellite phones did not work. We were told it would be five days until power was restored. This was an emergency, to be sure, but not the earthquake or tsunami we expected. At least once a month I had mentally pictured myself springing into action at the first sound of the tsunami siren to disconnect the library server (Save the Server!) and running with it up to higher ground. Once there I planned to lounge around in the fancy neighborhoods on the hilltops, noshing on energy bars and lying in the sun on my emergency blanket, waiting for NBC, CBS, or CNN to come for an interview.

This was not the emergency I had planned for. No, this was December, and this was the coast. It was cold, and it was only light for about forty minutes a day. Those of us who were not needed to cut up fallen timber, put out chimney fires, or save the neighbor’s cat from a tree still wanted to do something. So we did what any one who wanted to help our ravaged community would do. We opened the library. The library was freezing cold. Any dress code (and I say that loosely, after all, this is Seaside), was thrown out the window. We came to work in boots, woolens hats, gloves, coats and scarves. We kept them on all day, but never did get warm. The library was dark and damp to the point that we half expected bats to fly out from the 599.4 section at any moment. We moved our



base of operations around to the only south facing window in the building, so that we could see what we were doing.

Because we were one more dark building in a county of dark buildings, we made an “Open” sign and put it out on the library lawn. We did not really expect any patrons. After all, who would leave the safety of home, drive around downed power lines, under trees leaning over the road and through knee deep water to come to a library?

Lots of people, it turned out. We had our regular readers, but then, we got a whole new set, because when you have no cable, no Internet, no video games, and no phone service, what do you want to do? Read!

We gave flashlights to patrons who wanted to browse the stacks. Sometimes, the staff held the flashlights for our patrons so they could browse easier. We wrote down barcodes and patron numbers and book requests, and for the first time in years, we had no disputes over the Internet. We did everything we normally do, except we were bundled up like polar nomads. Did I mention that five days without hot showers, hair dryers, and getting dressed in the dark gave the staff a certain ambiance, but our patrons did not seem to mind in the least. They looked the same. It was a bonding experience.

The entire community came together. The fire station, having an emergency diesel generator, provided hot coffee to all departments. Portable generators were donated to local organizations and local restaurants donated all the rapidly thawing food in their freezers to organizations who provided hot meals to everyone. Then people started bringing food to the library. It was like a party, albeit one in the eternal dusk of the Siberian tundra. Patrons started to hang out, whether to read, chat or listen to the emergency radio that we had (hooray for disaster planning!). Everyone crowded around the one south window, as that was the only one with enough light to read by, and some of us got very up close and personal. Who needs Match.com when you have a situation like this? It almost became fun, if you forgot that you were freezing, couldn't see much, looked like offal, and probably smelled worse.

We kept the library open for four days without power. To be sure, we weren't heroes. That status went to the fire, police, public works, power company personnel and ham radio operators. And although we were not totally prepared for the event, there was not much we would have done differently. We had our emergency radio, flashlights, and wool socks. We had books. We were open. 

