

Honduras

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closes for Thanksgiving.

"The needs aren't going to go away, but the volunteers are going to be exhausted," says Eugene resident Bev Lahr, a member of the Comité. "They've put in a lot of hours and a lot of efforts, and they need a break."

"It's a crazy scene over there — they're so busy they have homeless people volunteering to help," agrees University graduate student Josh Peters, also a member of the Comité. "This can't go on forever."

Peters is in charge of the University branch of the relief efforts. He has overseen the setup of bins in the EMU Main Lobby, where students can donate items for Honduras without traveling downtown.

Although the bins stand alone and unmanned, emptied each night by Peters, students, faculty and staff have not neglected them, EMU director Dusty Miller says.

"A lot of people have brought stuff in. It's been excellent," he says. "The first bin on the first day was filled at least five times with clothes."

Clothes are no longer accepted — the Comité has already filled an entire storage room with clothing — but food and medical supplies are still in need, and although the Centro Latino Americano drive ends this week, the EMU will continue to take donations until Nov. 30.

But the Comité's work won't stop there. After the initial push to keep the hurricane survivors alive, Honduras will have to rebuild everything it has lost, step by step.

"We're talking about a country that borrowed a lot of money to build bridges. Now the bridges are ruined, but they still owe the money," Peters says. "It's a very difficult situation to rebuild in."

Although some of this debt has been forgiven, the country still has a long way to go.

But Bauer says the Comité is prepared to continue to help with more serious fund raisers throughout the year. Honduras is too close to too many people for the efforts to end here.

Hitting close to home

For many people, Honduras is merely a far-away speck on a map, a place known vaguely as one of the poorest countries in the world.

But for members of the Comité, and for many Eugene residents, Honduras is home — whether a former home or a home for friends and family.

"People would probably find it surprising how many communities have ties to Honduras," says Bev Lahr, a Eugene resident and member of the Comité. "The world is a lot smaller than it used to be. All of the people I've met have some tie to Honduras, either through the Peace Corps or as an exchange student.

They all have a close connection."

Take Peters, for example. During his three months of training for the Peace Corps, he lived with a host family in Santa Lucia, Honduras.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, Peters received a call from a member of that family, who now lives in Massachusetts.

"Apparently, a little stream that you could step over rose up and swept their house away," he says. "This is a family I know very well. My first thought was how to provide direct aid to them."

This reaction is not uncommon among people with friends and family affected by the hurricane. Many want to send food and supplies directly to their loved ones.

"Some people don't even know if their family members are alive or not," Bauer says. She knows hers are OK, but "some people who are part of the Comité haven't talked to their families at all. There's no way to communicate."

With communication cut off, homes destroyed, roads blocked and communities isolated, providing direct aid can be difficult. The best anyone can do is to help whomever they can and hope someone does the same for their families, Peters says.

"Everyone wants to get aid right to their families. Just get aid anywhere. The Honduran government is doing a great job of distributing it," he says.

The devastation

Although the Honduran government has worked hard in the face of disaster, the efforts just haven't

been enough to deal with a tragedy of this magnitude, Lahr says. Hurricane Mitch has left behind it a trail of chaos that both she and her husband have experienced firsthand.

"My husband left for Honduras last night," she confides. "I told him not to eat anything, not to drink anything and not to touch anything."

Lahr and her husband own a waste recovery business through which they buy wood products from suppliers in Honduras. The same business that called him to Honduras in the aftermath was the one that took Lahr to the nation's capital, Tegucigalpa, during the two weeks before Mitch arrived.

Lahr was staying in a neighborhood outside of the capital on Friday, Nov. 6 — the night the hurricane hit Tegucigalpa.

"It had rained all week; it was



Emergency supplies such as clothing, food, and water fill boxes headed to Honduras to aid hurricane victims.

Catharine Kenick/Emerald

raining all over the country," she recalls. "All of the rivers were filling up."

By 8:30 p.m., the river separating the village from the capital had risen to the base of the sole bridge that connected them. An hour later, Lahr heard a report that the bridge was covered.

At one point, she went outside. "The water went from curb to curb and was flowing in the street — and this was rain water. The river hadn't even flooded yet," she says.

The hurricane arrived between 3 a.m. and midnight, Lahr estimates. The power had already been out for more than an hour.

"The wind wasn't as bad as I had expected. By then they had downgraded it to a tropical storm," she recalls. "It was more the rain. There was more rain than you can imagine."

"It was like someone turned a faucet on over our heads."

The next day, Lahr surveyed the damage.

"All the landmarks were gone," she says. "There was a little shop that sold roasted chickens. The signs were still there, but the rest of it was gone. And the houses on the other side of the river were all gone."

In Lahr's neighborhood, 50 houses had been completely washed away and 200 more damaged, she says. At first she thought the bridge was gone, too, but it was merely covered with water. Later, when the river went down, Lahr learned that the bridge still stood, but was missing about 50 feet on either end.

Fortunately, a dirt road into town was available for those who had vehicles with four-wheel drive. After knocking on numerous doors, Lahr stumbled upon someone with four-wheel drive who was planning to make the trip.

"I asked if I could go with him because I knew it might be my only chance to get out," she says.

When she finally caught a plane back to the United States, Lahr left Honduras in chaos.

"Most of the bridges were still closed, and transit was very difficult. There were landslides on the roads, so they were either impassable or cut from two lanes to one. There was gas rationing, but every station I saw had a sign up saying they had no gas."

In one area, a four-lane highway had been cut down to two lanes

because people whose homes had been flooded were living on the road. In other instances, people had climbed on their roofs during the flood and ended up staying there for a week.

In the neighborhood Lahr had stayed in, people still had no water after 10 days.

"That's pretty hard for us to imagine. They can't take a bath, or flush their toilet or even cook," she says.

About one-third of the country's population is now homeless, and 70 percent of its infrastructure and crops are destroyed, as well as 90 percent of its roads.

"One thing that's hard for people to comprehend is it's a whole country whose infrastructure was destroyed," Lahr says. "There were people with no food or water, people on their roofs, asking, 'Why aren't you helping us?' But there was no way the government could respond to the communities that were cut off, no way to get help to them even if they had the manpower and equipment."

"People felt isolated, as if they were the ones who had borne the brunt of this."

The need

Food and medicine are still the two biggest needs in Honduras, Peters and Bauer agree.

When a disaster hits, people die in three waves, Peters explains. They either die immediately, they die shortly after due to injuries, or they die later of starvation or disease.

Honduras is in this third phase. With communities cut off from food supplies and people forced to drink contaminated water, starvation and disease are major concerns.

"A lot of children are going to die of diarrhea and dehydration," Peters says. "Cloth diapers need to be washed, and drinking water is mixed with sewage. A lot of babies are suffering more than anything else."

Already, the country has seen outbreaks of cholera, malaria and dengue, an infectious tropical disease, Bauer says.

In addition, food is becoming scarce. On Sunday during her stay in Tegucigalpa, Lahr volunteered at an American school, helping to cook meals for the hungry. The day before, the school had made 11,000 meals to take to shelters.

The next day, Lahr helped make 8,000 meals before the food ran out.

"In the morning, we were giving rice, beans, a tortilla and a piece of cheese. By the end of the day, all people were getting was a bag of plain spaghetti. That was all that was left."

"In the morning, we were told we were putting too much on the plates. We thought we were

putting small amounts, but we kept cutting down on the portions. There just wasn't enough food."

Because drinkable water is wanting and some areas have no electricity, foods that don't need to be cooked are in great demand.

"Keeping people alive is the most important thing," Lahr says.

Bringing people together

Hurricane Mitch may have devastated Honduras, but in doing so it has brought people all over the United States together to help out those in need.

When the hurricane tore through Central America 19 days ago, phones began ringing at Eugene's Centro Latino Americano.

"We got a lot of calls from people asking, 'What can we do? How can we help?'" Bauer explains. "We were seeing so many people who wanted to do something that we agreed to be a filter for the efforts."

Bauer formed the Comité of more than 20 people who have family members in Central America. During the past two weeks, a total of more than 300 volunteers have helped the Comité by collecting, packaging and transporting donated goods.

"Many of them are homeless themselves, but they said they wanted to help because people in Honduras are worse off than they are," Bauer says. "They have really made this effort go."

Since the Comité began, local schools and businesses have asked how they can help, and through Peters, University students have gotten involved, as well.

"I think this is an excellent outreach for students, to make them aware of what is going on," says EMU marketing director Lee LaTour, who secured bins and made signs for the campus effort. "It is wonderful the way everybody came together and made it happen."

Bauer has even been contacted by people in neighboring cities such as Newport, Roseburg and Albany who had heard of the Comité and wanted to help.

In Corvallis, students at Oregon State University have contributed 10,000 pounds of goods to the effort, says Susan Cleary, the school's event registration coordinator.

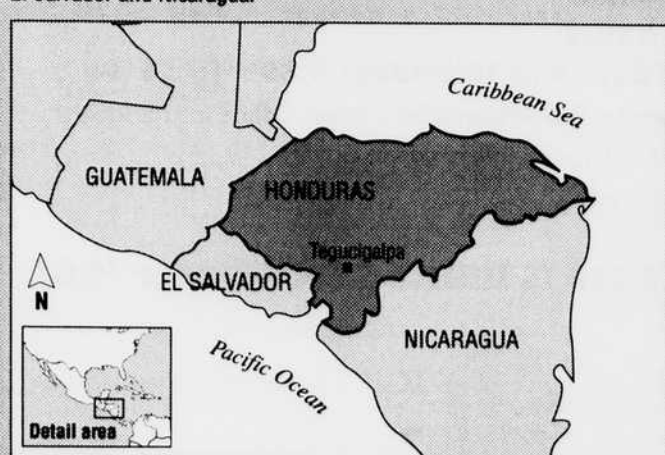
"We sort of started a domino effect in this region," Bauer says.

Both Bauer and Peters hope involvement throughout the community will continue as the Comité carries its fundraising efforts into the new year. Although the amount of aid so far has been enormous, it still pales in comparison to the destruction wrought by Hurricane Mitch.

"It was a very good effort, but it won't be enough to really help a country that has lost almost everything," Bauer says.

Hurricane Mitch hits Central America

Local relief efforts focus in Honduras, which lost 70 percent of its crops and infrastructure in the disaster. The hurricane also ravaged Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua.



Katie Nesse/Emerald