

Red Cross: Volunteer relays his experiences helping fire victims

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on Dec. 5, followed the next day by a phone call to make travel arrangements and run through a lengthy checklist ensuring his fitness. Two days later, he was at the Red Cross temporary regional headquarters in Camarillo, along with fellow volunteers Sue from Beaverton and David and Judy from Indiana.

They were soon whisked away to their assignment, the 35-bed Red Cross shelter set up at Oxnard College.

Beds and personal storage for evacuees lined the walls of the campus gymnasium. An elderly couple came with their dog, Scrappy, who interacted with everyone and brought some light to the otherwise gloomy situation.

Although the shelter was west of the blaze, strong winds blew in so much smoke that doors and windows were shut tight while heavy-duty air scrubbers ran 24/7 in the center of the floor.

Everts helped manage the tons of supplies and donations arriving day and night. He had free time after each 12-hour work shift and used it to visit nearby places remembered from his childhood growing up in the same area. Nights were back at the shelter in his own sleeping bag, a part of his personal emergency “go pack,” originally meant for deployment to Puerto Rico. The motto “Be Prepared” applies to many circumstances.

By Dec. 13, the Thomas Fire had burned 273,000 acres, destroying neighborhoods and entire communities. It generated 60 mph winds, knocked out power lines, blew over trees and ripped roofs from houses, some of which had not burned.

The devastation patterns



Above: A Red Cross volunteer at Oxnard College reads items for those evacuated from areas affected by the Thomas Fire.

Right: Hand-made sifter boxes, used for finding valuables in the rubble, were distributed to those who'd lost homes to the fire. Encouraging slogans are written on the boxes.

Above, far right: Some of the donated supplies.

Photos by George Everts for the Columbia Press



were sometimes bizarre. On some streets, every home was burned except one lucky one. It was just the opposite on other streets. In one driveway, a motorcycle was burned to a hulk while 3 feet away, a plastic garbage can was untouched.

Everts, after a week at his shelter post, was redeployed to a Disaster Emergency Supplies team. Their job was to drive through neighborhoods distributing free relief supplies to returning evacuees: blankets,

water, food and “sifters,” handmade by Red Cross volunteers. The sifters are for sifting through rubble in hopes of salvaging something precious.

Everts' roving team came upon an elderly couple returning to their destroyed home. As the couple unlocked their gate, a young fireman approached with tears in his eyes. He wanted to apologize that he and his crew had been unable to save their home. Three trucks had sprayed thousands of gallons of



water on the house while the surrounding neighborhood burned.

“We really, really tried as hard as we could,” the fireman said.

His volunteer deployment complete, Everts returned to Astoria just in time for Christmas.

“I could hardly believe the generosity of the people of Ventura County,” he said of the people he met in his childhood home area.

How to help

Get ready for The Big One by attending free Red Cross training, beginning Jan. 19 at Clatsop Community College.

For information, call Caren Black at 503-325-6886 or get class details after signing up for a free student ID at webreg1.clatsopcc.edu. Enter “Red Cross” in the schedule page’s “Course Title” box.

News in brief

Pacific Power vows to pass tax cuts to customers

Changes to the tax code were passed Dec. 22 that will lower federal taxes on corporations and Pacific Power is committed to passing the benefit on to consumers, the company wrote in a press release Wednesday.

“The benefit of this tax cut should be passed on to our customers,” said Stefan Bird, president and chief executive officer of Pacific Power. “And we will work with our regulators and stakeholders on the best way to do that.”

The full impact of the tax change will take several months to calculate.

Also, proposed changes to benefit customers, such as rate reductions, will require

approval of the state public utility commission.

It will be several months before the company can offer proposals on how best to pass the benefit on.

Class on strong bones set to begin

Strong Women, Strong Bones, a five-week program for midlife and older women, begins 5:30 p.m. Monday, Jan. 8, in Patriot Hall at Clatsop Community College, 1651 Lexington Ave., Astoria.

The hourlong sessions assist women in ways to maintain muscle mass, strength and function. There are mats and weights, but participants should wear comfortable clothes, athletic shoes and bring a water bottle.

Cost is \$25. To sign up, call 503-338-7564.