

# Students perform mock search and rescue

**Eleven youth from Astoria, Seaside finish CERT programs**

By Katherine Lacaze  
Seaside Signal

Fabricated moans, groans and pleas of “help me” emanated from the basement of the Seaside School District facility on South Franklin Street. Junior Caitlynn Howe, playing the role of incident commander, quickly briefed her team of 10 Astoria and Seaside high school students, carrying backpacks of supplies and wearing bright yellow reflective vests, on the simulated situation.

After receiving assignments, the students, who are part of the Community Emergency Response Team programs at both high schools, dispersed throughout the building to look for and treat victims, who were played by students in Seaside High School teacher Vanessa Unger’s drama class.

The simulation, held May 1, was the final exercise for the students, four from Astoria and seven from Seaside, to become certified. For the exercise, the simulated incident was an earthquake had taken place, but no tsunami followed. A majority of the community made it to the tsunami evacuation sites and were accounted for, but seven were not. The CERT members had to go back to the building to conduct search and rescue for the missing victims.

Once found, the victims — who had been realistically decked out in make-up by Seaside junior Holly Phipps — shared information they were given ahead of time so the student CERT members could assess their injuries and identify them as immediate, delayed or minor/walking wounded.

The injuries ranged from minor scrapes and bruises to a stick through the leg and a spinal injury. One victim was uninjured, but she played the role of a woman who was hysterical and upset for her friend, who had been severely lacerated. Unger had instructed her drama students prior to the exercise to take it seriously, not only because they were being graded based on their performance, but also to help out the student CERT members.

“They need to get as close to the real situation as possible,” Unger said.

The CERT members also were tasked with communicating with Howe and one another, treating



Members of the Community Emergency Response Team programs at Seaside and Astoria high school carefully prepare a victim to be transported during their final exercise to become certified in basic CERT training. The victims were played by students from Seaside High School’s drama department.

PHOTO BY HOLLY PHIPPS

the victims’ injuries and transporting them safely to the triage area. Howe was selected as incident commander because she excelled at a previous tabletop exercise that tested the leadership capabilities of different students posing as incident commanders.

The objective of the exercise, said Jeremy Goldsmith, Seaside’s RARE AmeriCorps intern, is that “we want to see (the students) physically do what we’ve taught them.” The exercise was the main component of their final, outside of taking a written test, and it was the most important.

“Once they do this, they will be certified in basic CERT training,” Goldsmith said.

He and Nick Sund, a RARE AmeriCorps volunteer and an emergency services coordinator for Clatsop County, led three pilot CERT programs at Astoria, Seaside and Warrenton high schools. At Warrenton, they held the class twice per week for nine weeks, so the students had their final in March. In Astoria and Seaside, the class was once per week until the last month, when they went to two classes per week to expedite the process.

Sund and Goldsmith, who were trained as instructors through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, offered the training this semester as a sort of “pilot program” at the three county schools. Their hope is the schools now will individually take over their programs and continue to offer them in each location.

“It’s been awesome,” Goldsmith said of the ex-

perience leading the programs. “It’s been incredibly rewarding.”

Todd Newton, from the Warrenton CERT, and Gale Scobie, from the Astoria CERT, volunteered to help monitor and shadow the students while they performed their assignments.

The group selected a safety word, “banana,” for when something in real life had gone wrong and the exercise needed to temporarily stop, but it was never used. After all the victims were rescued and treated, the group de-briefed and talked about what aspects could be improved upon. Most of the players, including the pretend victims, said the simulation illustrated ways communication could be better in the future.

That was an area that was lacking during the simulation, Howe agreed, from a leadership perspective. The hardest thing about the activity for her, she said, “was getting people to get back to me.” She recognized, though, that taking emergency response from an abstract topic in the classroom to a real-world activity presents new challenges for the students. The activity is removed from two-dimensional tabletop exercises and lectures to a three-dimensional space, where the students have to look out for problems and challenges below, beside and above them.

“I think they did a good job with it being our first practice,” Howe said.

Scobie agreed communication often is a persistent problem among response teams and nearly impossible to perfect.

“That’s usually the biggest issue,” he said. “You never can get it as good as you’d like to see it.”

Seaside freshman Elijah McShirley said the final exercise was his favorite part of the program because it was more life-like and they were able to apply what they learned in the classroom. He also enjoyed doing tabletop exercises during class and felt like the team improved from doing those to participating in the final. Overall, he said, he liked the program because “it’s fun to do, and it’s a learning experience.” It also trained him how to react during an emergency scenario.

“It’s more important to help with the relief process and not just be the one evacuating,” he said.

Howe doesn’t intend for her training to stop now. She and fellow Seaside junior Silvia Avila are planning to take a Train the Trainer course to become certified to teach others and then start a community CERT program in Seaside



KATHERINE LACAZE PHOTO

Members of the Community Emergency Response Team programs at Astoria and Seaside high schools perform a simulation during their final May 1. In order to become certified, the 11 students from both schools participated in a mock search and rescue exercise at the Seaside School District building. Drama students from Seaside High School played the roles of the victims.



PHOTO BY HOLLY PHIPPS

Seaside High School students Will Kautz, from left, Connor Adam and Caitlynn Howe communicate during a stimulation performed as part of their final for the Community Emergency Response Team training program. Seven Seaside students and four students who did an identical program at Astoria High School this semester joined as one team for the final simulation.

for their senior Pacifica Project.

“We just think it’s something everyone should know,” Avila said.

They are in the planning process and also are fundraising to purchase back-

packs with supplies for team members. For more information, call Seaside High School at (503) 738-5586 to speak with Avila or Howe, or email Avila at silvia.yesenia@outlook.com.

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