

HIS NAME IS EARL

A journalized reflection on my steps toward emergency preparedness...
in my own backyard

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I don't like my neighbor. Well, the truth is, I don't know my neighbor. I do know that next door - in my case that means across the yard, past the gazebo, beyond almost 2 acres of pasture, the fence and a wide, wild, dense patch of blackberry bushes - is a single wide trailer. A single wide trailer, surrounded by all the negative stereotypical visuals that might conjure up in your mind; boarded up windows, giant blue tarps, old tires and a single, muddy, deeply-rutted driveway. I don't like my neighbor; but the truth is, I don't know my neighbor.

This all started with my idea of helping my community, or my country, or maybe even helping out in places like Haiti or Japan. I wanted to join a disaster team, a *Healing Touch Disaster Relief Rescue Operation Society*. I had it in mind that I could be of service to firefighters at a 9/11 scene, or earthquake survivors suffering trauma in some Super Dome. My thinking also included my training; certification; coming HTP accreditation; all these verifiable skills that could help victims as well as rescue personnel. If only I knew how!

When I read about the opportunity to become part of the Healing Touch Professional Association (HTPA) Disaster Team, I sent an e-mail to express my interest. I received a reply suggesting the ACEP's One Voice Consortium requirement to complete the on-line Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) courses Incident Command System (ICS)-100, ICS-200, and ICS-700 classes. It just so happened that my life was in slow-motion at that time. At least it felt that way. I had recently graduated from community college, and more recently quit a part-time paying, but over-time stressful job. I was still under my own feet around the house waiting for my Healing Touch business to take off gang-busters. Each FEMA class required a few hours, which I spaced over about ten days. Truth be told, I scored below 80% on one course exam and had to swallow my community college educated pride and retake the whole thing. I sent off to HTPA that I had my certificates of completion from FEMA, then sat back to await my call to heroism.

A few months later, I noticed again a volunteer opportunity posted in the HTPA Newsletter. It seemed to offer options that I could choose from this time, like military outreach, disaster response or I could even share my own interest. My problem was, I just wanted *to do the work*, and I didn't care very much what it looked like. A few e-mails later, I volunteered for a 3 member committee to lay the foundation for HTPA's

Community Connections. During one meeting we were identifying just what disaster response really looks like. I was actually a bit startled at my own realization that flying off to Timbuktu to help complete strangers was far more appealing than sitting down with my neighbors to plan for a local disaster. I hung up from that phone call inspired to toss off my apathetic veneer, pull on my cape, and save Gotham City right here in my own back yard.

ORGANIZING MY NEIGHBORS

I called my local volunteer fire department. Mind you, I have made it very clear to my husband – because I *know* these volunteers - that if an emergency happens here to call the kids, call a vet, call a cab, but for heaven’s sake, don’t call 911. Instead, drag me to the car and get me to the nearest hospital (nearly an hour), to someone that really knows how to take care of me. Small town gossip aside, I called the Fire Chief and told him I wanted to do some kind of neighborhood emergency planning. You know, like *Neighbor Watch*, only different. I was sure either he or the real fire department, or someone he knew had something in place, so why re-invent the wheel? To my surprise, he thought that was just a nifty idea, but none of the organizations that he knew of really fit into our type of rural atmosphere. We talked for about 10 minutes when I got the bright idea to create my own plan. I talked about a simple form that would ask my closest neighbors their names, who lived with them, what their health issues were, and their emergency phone contacts. The Chief hung up the phone saying, “If you come up with some kind of something and get super rich selling it around the country, let me know, I could use the money”. I chuckled at his response and found myself willing to give it a try.

I typed up that form; I even added a line asking about pets and farm animals. I printed out ten, and got in my car that very afternoon and drove around farm to farm and dropped them in screen doors or handed them out in person to those who happened to be home. I told those I met in person that I would type up the information and make a Community phone book. Unfortunately, I forgot to put my name and phone number on the form. Details... details.

FACING UNEXPECTED FEELINGS

The hardest place for me to go was to that trailer. It was almost the closest, but it took me the longest to get to, and I almost didn’t go. I had purposely avoided it; but coming back home I was surprised at the time. I had made the phone call to the Chief, typed up the form, printed it off, and driven to nine neighbors in well under two hours. I would not be late for dinner. I passed my own house, and full of trepidation turned instead into the driveway of the *Trailer House Next Door*. Everyone else I have visited, I know. Over the years my kids sold them Christmas wrap, my cows have tromped through their gardens, my cat died in their dog house. I have lived here over thirty years, yet this person, this farm, this story, I do not know.

The Blackberry bushes are close, the trees are tall, I don’t know who lives here, or if they

have a ferocious pit bull chained to the rotting front porch. I breathe and begin to logic – if there was a vicious dog, I would have heard barking from my own backyard, I would have heard barking when I drove in. I would hear barking now, and yet as I listen beyond my breathing, it is very, very quiet. I step out of my car, and begin my approach. Something, a shadow, a movement within announces that my knock will be answered, and for only a moment, the door opens just a little. There stands an elderly man with thick glasses, a bit of white hair, and all hunched over. He says nothing...I stammer my spiel, and hand over the form. There is a nodding of his head and a guttural sound as he takes the paper and closes the door. Speechless and relieved that I have not been attacked, I hurry back to my car full of questioning who I just met, can he speak, can he read? What did I miss?

TRY, TRY, and TRY AGAIN

Not one form was returned. I didn't understand this because one of the neighbors was as excited as I was by the idea of this neighborhood phone book; at least they said so. In the meantime I called and left a message with the Red Cross, the one national group I am familiar with. One of my private motivations was to get professional training and (laughingly) covertly infiltrate an existing organization. It could be an undercover sleeper-type operation. Once I got on the inside, once THEY knew me, I could and of course would, bring Healing Touch right along. It would be a natural springboard into offering what I really want to offer. The Red Cross never calls back.

A couple of weeks later, I revealed my failures to the committee. They encouraged me to call the Red Cross back, and look into other organizations like Citizens Emergency Response Teams (CERT) and Green Cross. I didn't commit to anything, but I reluctantly agreed to consider it. See, part of me thinks that the right door opens at the right time, and if the Red Cross didn't want me, then why should I force the issue? I didn't know one of these organizations from another but I sent a few e-mails, and made a couple more calls to ask about training and opportunities for possible volunteer positions.

I start getting responses the next day, and the next, and the next. Details are explained about the difference between federal, state, county, and city programs. Some of the responses feel open, and some do not. I play phone tag with the county emergency management department. When we do connect I discover we have more in common than a desire to participate in emergency preparedness. She had worked in the Public School system like I have; talking to her was easy and comfortable. She asked about my current occupation, so I told her about Healing Touch and she was interested to know more about me. We made an appointment to meet at her office, which is near the health food store where I work one day a week. At about the same time I was accepted into a CERT training program, which happened to start in a couple of weeks.

OVERWHELMING IMPRESSIONS

The following week when I arrive at the emergency management office, I am surprised

at the security. I have to sign in and badge-up. There are cops, firemen, official and busy people in cubicles all over the place. Where the heck am I? I am retrieved by a friendly face and familiar voice. She takes me behind the scenes, in a very up-close and personal, yet surreal manner. I am given a tour of the Emergency Operations Center where people gather to support first responders in a disaster. On this day, no one was here. There is no emergency. All the stations sit empty. The high tech computers, phone lines, wall-size four-part television screens are blank and quiet... just waiting. Recent activations included flooding, severe weather, and the planning for a memorial to honor police officers killed in the line of duty... My son is a rookie police officer, I often stop for coffee near a fallen officer memorial, these disasters feel close to home. I am duly impressed and feel the impact of this space on more than my mind.

We sit to discuss the flyers, brochures and volunteer paperwork that are spread out in the EOC conference room. When I am asked what position I am interested in as a volunteer, I do not have it in me to pretend. I tell her the truth. I want to help those who sit in those chairs, in that highly stressful environment, and I can do that with Healing Touch. I talk more than I want to and I am not sure I make sense. So I jump in with how I am willing to answer phones, file papers, or even man a door. She has a few questions about Healing Touch. She told me they have tried to bring in massage therapists but many personnel were skeptical to this kind of 'pampering' when so many people need help out in the field. We discuss the differences that Healing Touch offers. The space can be secluded, or it can be the kitchen or break room; the simple presence of a *Healing Touch volunteer* might be a much better fit in an EOC. Then she asked me if I could give a talk about Healing Touch, a short informational lecture to key personnel. "Yes, of course", I said. "I teach an introductory class that can be modified to fit time constraints". We walked together back to her cubical. I was elated, and in shock. Was I, like, just accepted in here? AS a Healing Touch volunteer?

IT GETS SIMPLE – WITH HELP

As we draw toward conclusion, our conversation turns to my failed community involvement project. She tells me that she also works with neighbors to plan how they can help each other and she would be more than happy to come out to my house and talk to my neighbors. What do you know? All I have to do is invite them. We set the date and just *like that*, I have something planned, organized, and someone else is going to do the talking. I came home with a few forms to fill out, sign and mail back. I guess that's it... Once I go through a background check, I will be a registered emergency volunteer worker.

A few days later, I typed up a different form. This one is just an invitation for coffee and discussion about neighborhood emergency preparation. It took fifteen minutes to drive around and hand these out. Wouldn't you know, Trailer Man just happened to be on the highway, picking up his mail. All I had to do was pull over, roll down my window and hand him a piece of paper. I took the time to introduce myself, and as he held the invitation, haltingly, and with difficulty he said, "Earl, my name is Earl".

FAST FORWARD – THREE MONTHS

I have completed the nine week CERT training and simulation drill. I have been issued a state Emergency Worker Identification Card and Saturday was the neighborhood meeting. Two days before the meeting, I once again handed out flyers sent and made by the county that look oh, so official, reminding my neighbors to come. Nothing seems to have changed as I drove down the bumpy, muddy, driveway except my fear. There were no words from Earl, and the door didn't open much farther. But I know his name, and his name is Earl.

What I hope I shared in this article:

If you have a desire to help – come forward

If you don't hear the answer you are expecting – let them or someone else know again

If you don't know how to begin – begin anyway

Failure is just another way to spell success

Call local and national well-known resources

Read Christina Burgman's *Not If, When* in February's Energy Magazine

If you get discouraged - talk about it

Expect the unexpected

Be willing to test your assumptions

If you think you know your neighbor, give your heart a chance to get to know them better

Paradox: This does not take a lot of time, and yet does not happen overnight