

## The ghost of Hurricane Katrina begets a new emphasis on self-help

By Michael S. Williams

**R**ecently on the radio show Community Alert we interviewed Donna Lee, President of PlanItNow. This organization was founded by Morgan Freeman following Hurricane Katrina to advocate empowerment through information and collaboration of people living in hurricane and severe storm areas of the coastal regions of the United States, Mexico and the Caribbean. The board has recently expanded their mission to include other natural hazards and human-made disasters. PlanItNow operates with the understanding that no matter where you live, a natural disaster can happen at any time.

So what does an organization formed to address the needs of hurricane and storm victims have to do with Santa Barbara or California in general? The short answer: everything. Keep in mind that despite the recent fires on the South Coast flooding is the number one disaster loss for the county. Nationally, flooding dwarfs fire damage for insurance claims. We can learn a lot from those who deal with the flooding caused by major storms year after year.

From a planning point of view, storms are different than fires and earthquakes because today's weather technology provides significant warning of approaching storms. Even tornados can be reasonably well predicted. However, fires and earthquakes strike suddenly and without warning. Interestingly, despite our own weather systems in place to warn the potential of fires such as Red Flag Alerts, many of our local fires have not been on our worst critical fire weather days. Thankfully, we have been particularly fortunate that none of our fires have started at night.

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in August of 2005 killing about 1,800 people and caused over \$435 billion in damages. Additional damage hit the coasts of Louisiana and Texas. The initial response, or lack of it, by local, state and federal resources is now legendary. What did not happen in government response and support was so remarkable that it revolutionized emergency planning. Moreover, the pathetic response of agencies charged to respond to such events has fueled the development of private organizations throughout the country to take charge and find solutions to their own local problems. It has been clearly proven that waiting for government assistance is not a good or wise plan despite the claims otherwise. Today's slick marketing does not change the reality of the limitations of government on all levels.

The impacts of Katrina are still very much evident. The displacement of families and business was profound and still ongoing. This is particularly interesting considering the fact that the South is hit by storms every year. In this case, the weather service put out one of the most controversial warnings in history prior to Katrina. Still a good number of people chose to stay and were all too unprepared.

But these issues are not unique to the South. Right here in Santa Barbara we still see the impacts of the Gap, Tea, and Jesuita fires. The stories of disrupted and displaced families continue. There are many property owners who have discovered that they will not be able to rebuild because of permitting issues, improper or non-existent insurance and changes in building codes. These folks have found out the hard way that planning and preparation is essential. The question to ask yourself right now is "If my house burned down could I rebuild it?" This


is a good question to ask if you are shopping for a new home too. Can it be rebuilt? The answer may well be no.

One does not need to go to Louisiana to find people and organizations taking charge and doing something about their community and disaster planning like PlanItNow. Locally The Hollister Ranch is expanding their Emergency Operations Plan. This includes significant prevention and community education programs as well as improving roads and fuel mitigation projects. The Ranch is also improving their internal fire company to be more efficient and better trained. Funding for this project is through local donations and community support. They have also aligned with other local groups to share resources and experience as well as launching their own website [hollisterranchfirecompany.org](http://hollisterranchfirecompany.org).

In the Santa Barbara region a number of self-help emergency response organizations have emerged over the decades and more are organizing today. Communities must be able to help each other in time of need. Waiting for someone else to come take care of you is at best foolish. With today's budgets, layoffs, furloughs and changes in priorities, taking charge is your only real option for success.

Over the last couple of decades the collective "we" have capitulated our responsibility to others, particularly to government. The mantra of today is if something happens just call 9-1-1. About every emergency plan I have read starts with calling 9-1-1. While procedurally this is a good idea and is a matter of policy, the public resources you are calling are profoundly limited and it shows. The question being asked today by the public is who is going to come and how long will it take for them to get there?

Like it or not, profound changes are on the way on every level of our professional and personal lives. This is not news to readers of this page. Some of these changes are already obvious, others are more benign. The lack of funding is only a portion of the issue. Other changes include redefined missions, changes in priority, expanded responsibilities without additional resources, litigation and the ever expanding fear of liability by public officials. When doing nothing is the best option we are all in trouble.

Self-help is empowering and is a way to take back what so many have given away to others. Despite what we may be told by those think they can protect us, no one cares about your family, property, investments, employment, health, financial stability and overall safety like you. Protect it, cherish it and guard it. Once it is gone it is difficult to get back. As a community we can no longer assume that someone is going to respond and fix or clean up our mess, or put us back together again. In truth, it was never really there, it just looked like it. 

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