



MySafe:LA Podcast

Fire and Life Safety Education

Our mission: providing children, families, and seniors in Los Angeles with life-saving education, resources, and benefits.

Episode 3

LAFD Captain Stacy Gerlich

- Speaker 1: You're listening to MySafe:LA Fire and Life Safety podcast.
- David Barrett: Hello, everyone. My name is David Barrett, I'm with MySafe:LA, and this is another MySafe:LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. Today we have acting Los Angeles City Fire Captain Stacy Gerlich with us. Good morning Stacy, how are you?
- Stacy Gerlich: Good morning David. I'm very good, thank you.
- David Barrett: I'm really thankful that you can be here. You have the ability to share with our listeners some very important things about not only what happened in your memories back then, but some of the things that have happened since, and of course, the importance of a community being prepared, not only in advance, but to be able to respond afterwards. 20 years ago, on January 17, 1994, where were you working? What was your assignment, what was your rank?
- Stacy Gerlich: Well, at that time I was the rank of a firefighter/lead paramedic, and I was assigned to the Disaster Preparedness section, and part of the Community Emergency Response Training unit, better known as CERT. My capacity during that time was a CERT instructor, so I was tasked with providing the curriculum that later became a national curriculum, and it was designed to train community people how to be more informed and prepared to handle disasters. Not just earthquakes, but anything from wildfires, to tornado, hurricane, and flood, and the things that we know that Mother Nature can deliver us.
- David Barrett: Absolutely. So, you were probably at home asleep when the earthquake occurred, is that right?
- Stacy Gerlich: I was. I was vividly, funny you should say, I do remember, I think it was about 4:31 in the morning, and I was thrown from my bed, and quite abruptly, and had to quickly figure out what was going on, and it sounded like a freight train, I do remember that, even

though it was 20 years ago. It's funny how we store some of these memories in our mind, but at the time, what was so difficult for me, if you will, was I was living out in the Santa Clarita Valley, and I had 2 dogs, I had a Dalmatian and a Labrador, and my Dalmatian had given birth to 9 puppies 2 weeks before the earthquake. So, as the maternal instincts kicked in, I remember thinking, "Oh my God, the puppies." So, I somehow got down the hallway, and went into a bedroom where they were in a whelping box, and I transferred them from the whelping box into a portable kennel, and I must have counted 3 to 4 times thinking, "I don't know if I have them all," and certainly working off the memory, I just remember I was just so out of sorts. So, once they were all accounted for and in the box, the bigger dogs had slept outside in a kennel, and I went out and made sure that everything was OK, then went into my firefighting mode of checking the house, and doing the lap around, as we say, and making sure that I didn't see anything that was so obvious that I needed to handle it right away, no fire or anything of that matter, and I did shut off the water, and I shut the gas off, only because I was smelling gas, and later I discovered that it wasn't coming from my house, or my neighbor, but there was a large gas line that had broken, and I was downwind of it.

All of these things, they happen so quickly, and we all react differently as we know; however, that being said, I at that point, thought to myself, "Well, OK. I'm an LAPD firefighter, and I took the oath, and now I need to go to work." So, all the dogs went outside into the kennel, talked to the neighbors and said, "Hey, keep an eye on them, not sure when I'll be back, but just know they're out there." That was that, and in the car I went, after of course, getting dressed and ready, and I drove down San Fernando Road, because I at the time was living where the 5 and the 14 crossed, and so, that was not going to be a route that I could take. Now, I knew that because I did have the radio on, and I was listening to the reports, and trying to gather as much as I could, given that my mind was really just boggled. I got to the underpass there was a CHP officer, asked for my ID, and you know what, I rolled down the window, showed it to him, identified myself, and he says, "OK, the bridge is still swaying, so when you're ready, just punch it. You should be fine." I looked at this guy, and I thought are you nuts? I'm not prepared to do that right now. So, my risk management thing, I'm thinking there's no way. I turned the car around, went back home, did another lap around the house trying to get my thoughts together. Checked on the dogs. Back in the car, headed back to where I came from. I put my ID against the window this time, didn't even roll it down, and I waited for the

nod from the CHP officer, and just drove forward, and once I arrived at fire station 88, and reported in to my supervisor, and then began coordinating the day's plans. The department kicks into the earthquake mode, and there's a lot of other procedures that take place, but for me, personally, it was going out with a couple of the instructors and trying to drive around and take pictures, so that we could use that for training purposes, and then also, just being there in our uniform and helping if we ran across people that needed, or looked like they needed some assistance. Busy day.

David Barrett: For our listeners, one thing we want to probably make clear, is that your assignment at the time didn't have you either on a rescue ambulance or on a fire engine, so you, in your training capacity, didn't have to respond to respond to emergencies, so you had the ability to go to your location, fire station 88 is in the San Fernando Valley, pretty close to where Reseda and North Ridge are, I think one of the interesting things about the North Ridge earthquake is as we discovered afterwards, the epicenter was actually in Reseda, not in North Ridge, but because of the fatality count, and some of the major structural collapses, North Ridge kind of stuck, and in your role, you had the ability to freelance a little bit, in terms of how you would spend your time and what you would do. As you drove around the city, with your camera and the other members, what did you see? What reminds you today from an imagery point of view?

Stacy Gerlich: Of course, like everybody has seen over and over again, we're up at Rinaldi and Balboa where the gas line broke, the water main broke, there was a pretty good wall of fire, and there was quite a bit of water. That sticks out a lot, and the other things that stick out were driving in neighborhoods, but more so on the busier streets like Devonshire, and Reseda Boulevard of course, we really tried to stay away from because that's as you were pointing out, that's where the Northridge Meadows apartment was located, and it was watching the community people, and some of them were appearing to be pretty controlled, and others just the hands to the face, and the looks and the wide eyes of, "Oh my God!" Clearly, people not being prepared and people storming supermarkets and trying to gather food and water. These are the things that really stick out, and of course were, in retrospect, good teaching points, and good things that we could bring into the future classes and the trainings to really talk about.

David Barrett: Tell us briefly about what CERT is about, particularly as it relates to the concept that in the event of a major earthquake, first

responders are likely to not be available to anyone except those in the most dire circumstances. I know for example that the USGS said that if the San Andreas were to rift, we're talking about 1200 or more fires in just a few moments, and if a quake goes through Hollywood, 11000 people dead or injured and some fear on behalf of Cal-Tech and USGS but the entire Hollywood community, including the Hollywood Hills, would burn to the ground, and in that context, the community needs to be ready to take care of itself, and that's really what CERT is about, isn't it?

Stacy Gerlich:

It really is, and you know, let me just back up a second, because in the capacity for the fire department, and myself as a firefighter and first responder, we collectively are all responsible for our own safety and well being, and that of our family, and that being said, as a first responder, that's what our job is, is we're providing fire and life safety to the citizens. Now, with that in mind, we're humans as well, so it's incumbent upon us to make sure that we've prepared ourselves and our family, because at the very beginning, if I haven't done that, if I haven't done my due diligence to prepare the family and have all the things that I need, in terms of food and water for sustainability, the message has always been 72 hours, but quite frankly we should be thinking 2 weeks in terms of our supplies. 3 days is nothing, and we first responders, we have to prioritize, and we have to consider the time of day, the day of the week, in terms of where we potentially will find the largest loss of life, or the potential for the large loss of life, and that's how we run our operations. So, when I say the time of day and the day of the week, 4:30 in the morning, there are no schools in session, but hospitals and assisted living and those types of things, that's going to be a concentration point for us, that just gives you an example of all the things that we have to think about as well. Where CERT really comes in and where the value is, is that the training is something that gives individuals and the citizenry the information that they need to start getting themselves more prepared if they are at the point of taking the training, then they're going to always pick up something, they're going to learn a little bit more, they can be more prepared, but really this is the deal, we need trained citizens. We need people who can assist us, who can minimize what we need to do, to go out there. We're not going door to door, and with that being said, we count on our citizens to help us. We count on them to be able to maybe flag down that fire engine that's coming down the street, and says, "Hey, I'm CERT trained, this is what we got, it's all under control." That's a little bit more fast forward, but truly, that's where that benefit comes from, and we're all in this together. I think that Craig Fugate,

from FEMA, his administrator says it best with his full community concept idea, and that is that public private partnerships all of us play an important role here. We, if you live in the Hollywood Hills, you stated that fact from the USGS, I think that the model earthquake that they put out there, the 8 point on the San Andreas and 4 minute shake time, and \$150 billion in damage, 1800 lives lost, the fires that you speak of, these are the things that we need to be taking seriously. If you live in the Hollywood Hills, or you live in an area that is inundated with brush, or you have very limited access and egress, you need to have plans. You need to have these things prepared ahead of time, not the day of, and that's where CERT really, really brings the value to the citizens. It's something that, fortunate for the citizens of Los Angeles, it's free, and where do you go and get this kind of information and instruction, and professional instruction, and real life experience from the people, the firefighters, that are delivering it. I mean, it's really a no brainer to me. I have so much passion for this program, which is why I have been involved, and why I ran it for so long and loved it, and still love it, and I always say to people that regardless of where I'm assigned, CERT is in every fiber of my being, and maybe that's just the preparedness piece, or the altruistic part of how I really think and feel about the citizens and what they bring to us as the first responders.

David Barrett: Well, you know, I think an important outcome from this is that for many years, and in many communities, CERT represents an opportunity for people who want to be involved with their community. People who are kind of driven, their makeup may be that they're helpers, or their givers, and they want to give back to their community or be involved, but frankly, in a complex environment like Los Angeles, where there are so many risks from natural disaster, it should go beyond that shouldn't it? It should be there's a responsibility to make sure that within each community that there's a number of people who have gone through the CERT training, simply with the same level of responsibility that you would have for neighborhood watch, or for anything else that is community driven where it seems to me that a neighborhood should, absolutely without question, make sure that they have CERT members within the ranks of their neighbors. Today, as we look forward, we've been very fortunate that we have not had a major earthquake in the last 20 years, but I think if you ask anyone, and I'm going to ask you right now Cap, Los Angeles is not prepared for the next major earthquake are we?

Stacy Gerlich: No, we're not, and you brought up a really good point, and I actually wrote a paper about this, a white paper if you will, but

here's the thing. Since 1987, we have trained approximately 60,000 people in the citizen Los Angeles, and given the population that we have of 4 million, that's nothing. What my vision, my vision, to back up what you just said, is that we have at least 10% of the population, 400,000 people trained, and yes, we need CERT people in every neighborhood, and the way to do that maybe for us is to break the city up as it already is by council districts, and the fire stations, the battalions, and somehow marry those up, and look at their council and take our public safety people, and potentially, not potentially, make sure everybody's trained, and then start looking at how to coordinate it and organize it better, but absolutely, we need every neighborhood, every community with a certain percentage of that population trained in CERT. That's what's going to make the difference.

David Barrett: Well, thank you very much, I greatly appreciate you spending time with us today, and we obviously don't look forward to the next earthquake, but it's coming, and we all of course need to be ready, and in your role, as a Captain with the Los Angeles City Fire Department, we greatly appreciate your service, and I hope that you have a continuing safe and prosperous career, and your daily commitment to the Community Emergency Response Teams is really greatly appreciated. For all of our listeners, we will be interviewing a variety of fire fighters, both active and retired, and you'll be able to find all of these podcasts on our website, at mysafela.org/podcasts and we're excited about our next series of interviews, and I hope that all of our listeners are as well. This is David Barrett for MySafeLA, and thank you very much for listening.

Speaker 1: This is a MySafeLA: Fire and Life Safety podcast. Make sure to visit us at mysafela.org.