

Stories from the Front in American Samoa

By Tim Serban

American Red Cross Spiritual Care Response Team (SRT) Lead
Disaster Relief Operation - American Samoa

Snohomish County Chapter American Red Cross volunteer Tim Serban was deployed to American Samoa Friday, October 2 as member of the National Red Cross Response Team. Tim is the Director of Mission Integration and Spiritual Care with Providence Regional Medical Center Everett and has been a volunteer with Red Cross since 1999. His first volunteer training with the Red Cross was in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. Tim is thumb-typing these reports and sending them home using his I-pod mobile device--when connections are available.

DAY 1: Saturday 10/3/09

Action report briefing from military included warnings about tsunami washing sand away uncovering many unexploded WWII ordinance, advising volunteers to shut off cell phones immediately, mark the spot and call the military EOD teams. Not expected and not grounded here in the island.

We arrived via USAF C-17 "Spirit of Kamehameh" into American Samoa after an 11 hour hold in Hawaii and a 5.5 hour flight. We came to our shelter, an outdoor, covered gymnasium aptly named Ionnnes Paules II (John Paul II) at 4 a.m. A quick rest and wake at 7 a.m. off to the HQ--a tent with a warehouse and office that was created by welding two 40 ft cargo containers together side by side.

Connected with Mental Health, Client Services and Partner Services leads. Was informed about VOAD (Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster) meeting at 1pm with Partner Services. Attended Partner Services meeting/call with National VOAD. Local UCC (United Church of Christ) Pastor and key local leaders, 10 people including FEMA and DSHH Reps. Addressed need for emotional support of those impacted. Plan to go out tomorrow to support men in grief with another MH (Mental Health) ARC member. LBJ hospital to refer those who have been hospitalized and released to us to follow, especially men and those who have lost children for follow-up.

Also was able to check and confirm two local families living in high impact areas were safe and well. They were families of staff from my home hospital in Everett.

By the way I have connectivity in, where else, the only McDs (McDonalds) on the island and primary source of sustenance for us.

DAY 2: Sunday 10/4/09

Following a local invitation to attend Mass at Christ the King parish it was truly moving as it was the community's first Sunday service since the earthquake & tsunami.

Action items of the day. After teaming up with local Mental Health resources in the community I went on to an area of Leone, A. Samoa. Being male support people, we we're tasked with the job to attempt to reach out to key men in the local community who have faced the greatest loss ever, their children.

How, as a father would you face the grief of losing your children fleeing their school to try to make it home? How would you handle the deep grief of not only losing your home but also facing the reality that you could have lost your entire family and how do you celebrate the fact that all survived except your little angel, your only daughter who was just six years old? These were just some of the realities we walked into today.

I can say one thing that really connects with kids is the fist bump and blow-up. If you don't know what it is, ask your kids or grandkids. We met with a teacher of preschoolers who is facing the reality of school starting tomorrow and what to say or do to help them process the grief of who doesn't end up showing up for school and the fear that those who didn't show may not be ever coming back.

That will be our call tomorrow, as we have been requested by local leaders to begin to meet with teachers and helping them address their grief just before stepping into the classroom.

Then there are us men. Two of us, another Northwest area Red Cross volunteer and myself, the epitome of a grandfather and "younger" father who have found a team approach in supporting men in grief and helping them know it's "for their kids sake" and their own that they get help.

We are considering ways to connect leaders in the communities with those who are in shock and trying to survive. Coming by this Friday will be the work of two families to have the funerals of their children, which means digging their own child's grave, all of which are in the front yard of the family home. Then bringing family together and hosting them in what would have been your home, but is now uninhabitable and there are not many options for alternatives, tradition, culture, honor, and history mandate that, for one to have honor that they would do these things.

Call it part of the grief work, families with loss often are working tremendously hard and they do have the love and support of amazing community family commitment. All will surround them; the prayer of this community is a constant source of strength. They welcome every bit of support and advice for caring for their kids their children and themselves. The little we provide is much when you have limited access to such support.

Today? One of those once in a lifetime over the top days that change your life because you walk with people in places of loss and when we leave we see a bit of hope and a child who with silent smiles wishing you Tofa! (goodbye) with a fist bump-blow-up!

DAY 3: Monday 10/5/09

Today began at 6 a.m. as we were requested to partner with Key DOH psych leaders to start at two schools, one elementary academy and one vocational high school. It (school) starts today and many emotions of the teachers and students for the first day back.

300 students at an elementary school and one colleague covered this location; I covered support to 400 students at the high school through the morning. They had an assembly and I was the presenter on handling the grief, stress and emotional aftershocks of a disaster. The students were open, honest and asked deep questions. Many were personally impacted and those who lost a family member came up to me directly to process their grief.

Following the assembly at the high school I went back to the elementary school and was invited into a 6 grade class who had lost their classmate. They asked open questions about their fears, their concerns and their hopes for the family of their lost classmate. They decorated pictures and outlined the depth of this loss and how they experienced the shock of the earthquake and tsunami.

They will be making a site visit with their classmates and teacher, to the site where she (their classmate) was swept away and they will sing songs and leave flowers in hopes that one day her body will be found. Such depth and incredible honesty with what they need in order to grieve, is equivalent to adults.

The rest of the day was spent processing with teachers. Even the 5-year-olds drew amazing pictures of their face after the tsunami and bird's nest grief assessments. The faces: half were smiles and the others were sad. When asked, the sad (faces) were Mad at the ocean and happy faces were Happy that their homes were safe.

Still unpacking, next plan for coming day, possibly based at LBJ hospital to assess support needed for families at the morgue operations.

First priority, those in greatest need.

DAY 4: Tuesday 10/6/09

Today began at LBJ Hospital in Fangatonga village toward the center of the Island. The responsibility to assess the situation at the hospital mortuary which is clearly overwhelmed. We have a mental health person staffing two phones in a fairly large chapel space. All calls from the Island and "Off Island," as the locals call it, come through here.

We were invited to bring male support to key victims and families with adult males as there are no male support team caregivers on the island yet. We went to homes and supported strong Samoan families who had lost family members or those who had witnessed the deaths of many.

On our way down a devastated road in Pago Pago Village, a boy in his teens ran across a debris field to get our attention. When we stopped he asked, "can you come back and see my father, he needs to talk to us."

We did and it was deeply moving, as (he told us how) his sister died in the tsunami and how she was found by her sister-in-law and cared for with the greatest dignity a person could receive. To witness the tears of a strong Samoan man were just so deeply touching, as we will be seeking to reduce the fear of tears of our brothers on the Island.

Today, we were called "*forever family of the Samoan people*" and if today was the last it would have been so worth it.

After teaching the kids yesterday there's not a place we go where there's not someone waving thanks.

And as the day wound down in Pago Pago, I had received an email from home, with a request from the Mainland Washington (unlike) that I have never received before.

I did not know her, nor do I think we have ever met, but this unique request (came) after reading an article in the local paper about my trip...she called my home asking if I was ever in Pago Pago Village, would I check on the grave of her beloved brother who had died in the early 1960s and she had heard that the cemetery was destroyed in this Tsunami. So since we were already in Pango village we had just about an hour to get in and get out of the area. Having no idea where it was, we set off and located what appeared to be one of the only public cemeteries on island. We first observed

devastation, headstones tossed by the tsunami and many were broken. I parked the car, said a brief prayer, and as I walked I was welcomed by the sight of the marker with his name on it. It was perfectly intact.

And as the sun shined brightly on this late afternoon sky between two massive jungle-like mountains, I made a call to the woman in her Everett area home, and after introducing myself I stated, "on behalf of the American Red Cross I am calling to inform you that I received your message and as we speak I am standing at the foot of your Brother's grave site...while the cemetery has sustained damage, your brother's resting place is safe and secure and has sustained no damage whatsoever."

And as I heard the tears of gratitude, I let her know that we are honored to bring her this news and I have taken pictures of her brother's grave which I will be able to share with her personally upon my return in a few weeks.

Today was clearly another one of those "deeply moving life-changing bookmark days."

A day that I will be unpacking for a lifetime.

Tomorrow, Wed. we will begin again with the children who lost their classmate, they will go with their teachers for a site visit to the location where their 11yr old classmate last lived. She was lost with her mother when the waves came through.

And the children will bring part of themselves to leave at the site. Then we will teach teachers about grief and the preschoolers and then my Mental Health colleague will go back to a high school to train teachers about Psychological First Aid. And I wrap up tomorrow with a few site visits to families and then work with leaders of Teen Challenge on Samoan TV at 6:30pm

DAY 5: Wednesday 10/7/09. We never know...

So just when you think the nerves are settling down on this island of grief, you experience what we experienced today, a Tsunami Warning as we were working with the fears of the early childhood educators.

Their school students, homes, and people were lost, and the grief was very evident as the emotional concerns were palpable the minute we looked out the classroom window to see a sea of children in uniforms pouring out of their schools and all walking quickly down the road uphill towards us. Before we knew it a teacher called out another Tsunami, "it's real it's not a drill, everyone get to higher ground now." Within a minute all were piled into cars and into the backs of pickup trucks on their way toward the jungle mountain tops.

The clouds hovered like fog around the top and as we followed a steady stream of vehicles driving up the mountain. Every 100 to 200 feet a young man stands holding a

metal hammer-like bolt next to an empty, rusty oxygen tank suspended above the ground. Each is beating a steady and constant sound like a gong that echoes through the village. Just as one sound fades another gets louder....

Throughout the entire area, people pour out of their villages on foot and we make it to the top of the hill in time to hear the Tsunami Watch change to a real, more serious tsunami warning and when we thought we had 2 hours they shorten the time to impact to 50 minutes and from the top of the mountain you see tankers and fishing ships and the occasional sailboat head out of Pago Village lagoon and they move out at full power, and in the silence of everyone around you, you know they are straining their eyes as far out over the ocean to see the waves approaching. All communications are shut down due to jammed phone lines.

All emergency evacuation plans end at the top of the mountain as you are with a new family, just you and them. Are you about to be a witness to another devastating blow or are you just going to wait? You can hardly keep from triple dialing those you love and we began to share numbers of our loved ones back on the mainland in case one of us gets through. This time it was me, Carla my wife, answered and I let her know I was safe and she was the lifeline for four other people from the mainland.

Thank you for being our voice to say we were okay.

One earlier story before, it was our trip with 6 graders to the site where their classmate died and I can hardly not think that if this were earlier we would have been at the waters edge with 11 yr olds as they sang their Samoan Farewell song on their 21 ukuleles. I may send that song soon.

But it was a very deeply precious moment as the whales breached in the sea behind them, something that rarely is seen in this area and rarely seen as one whale came very close and blew its spray and the kids got their sign from their friend that she is safe and at peace. A sight that no one could experience without the gift of tears, and so I send this across the sea with the echo of the day still playing in my mind and the beauty of the love they have for those they lost.

DAY 6: Thursday 10/7/2009 - Short & Sweet

Began the day with one plan and schedules changed. There were visible signs that the previous day's Tsunami Watch/Warning had more than rattled the nerves of many. Teachers and students alike were impacted.

People are shaky and the students are nervous too. I even believe that one of the last things I said to a group of teachers was that they needed to be honest and truthful and if a student asked could this happen again? Then we need to tell the truth and say we don't know. It could happen but this what we are doing to be safe and need

you to let us know what helps you to feel safe.

Today mostly in Pago Pago Village with families and individuals in need:

The emotional aftermath is very real.

It is great working together with excellently trained Mental Health members and collaborating partners within the Community. No one is an Island. Sleep is calling soon.

Tomorrow the funerals of the children of the Samoan village of Leone.

DAY 7: Friday 10/9/2009 - The rest of the day

From the hospital we went to support five separate families. As mentioned earlier, the common word is that the tsunami warning really was difficult on everyone. You see they really rarely ever get them and to have two in a week is very difficult. We learned much about the village structure and how community ownership works, all funds are community funds, according to one person who lost a family member. Family members were busy digging the grave, mixing cement by hand as I have seen in El Salvador.

Then I learned about the details of how the community does a burial at sea. The relative shared with me the entire ceremony and process as it is done here. The rituals and traditions and process is truly a beautiful way to honor those who love the sea as their home.

Next, we received a call to support a man and his 16 yr old nephew who didn't see the tsunami until it hit the house in front of them and pushed their vehicle over 400 yards. When he awoke, he was dazed and found himself in the back seat. They both got out only after his nephew shook him awake. "Nighttime is the scariest time," a common phrase we hear a lot. The fear that the earthquake caused us is as scary as the tsunami that followed. Many speak of the sound the earth makes in a big earthquake. Others speak about the deep jungle people who remain high in the mountain jungles of American Samoa. For many it's out of choice, for others they may fear coming down because of their fear of a tsunami.

When people talk of those living in the jungle, they say in order to get there one cannot drive and you may mostly be climbing a very narrow path that is quite possibly very vertical which sometimes skirts along the edge of the cliff with a shear drop below. Something about the thought of these impressive mountain jungles is intriguing but no, Mom, I wouldn't take any chances. Red Cross does a phenomenal job keeping its volunteers safe and well supported.

Now on a lighter note one thing that I still can't get my mind around is how big the bats are at night. They are endangered so there are not a lot of them. But when you see one, that's about enough. One local person said, "[they're endangered] so that means we can't shoot them." They have the wingspan of a seagull. So amazing and a little over the top to see.

Well that wraps up the night.

Day 8: Saturday 10/10/2009

The day began with a referral for Spiritual Care and Mental Health to support a family of a two year old who was apparently having dramatic reactions since the earthquake. We both have experience working with kids and know the age-specific reactions and signs of trauma in children. But there is simply something that has to ask about what could the reactions look like in a child 2 yrs old? We even wondered if the child's reactions could be a reflection of a parents reaction to an earthquake. Not so in this case. The child will run away and hide at night or when a loud noise happens the child cries, gets nervous and tries to find safety often being very attached to the parents. One of the first things my Mental Health Colleague did was bring a Teddy bear for the parents to give the child and the hold the child had on the bear was remarkable. We taught the parents the basics, be watchful in their play, be sure they eat sleep and breathe. By the time we left the child was play! ing and laughing with another sibling. The bears in both children's arms.

Next back to Leone for a followup visit following the funeral of their daughter that was held yesterday. Mom slowly healing from her injuries says that she was waiting for our return today because she had something for us. She reached into the only backpack she owned and pulled out the very last two buttons with her daughters picture on them and the phrase "God only picks the best flowers for his garden". She said she saved these buttons for us and she wanted us to have them. She said, "if I had a picture of you both I would have put them in her daughters backpack that was buried with her because she deeply appreciated the support".

She asked us what we thought of Samoans burying their family members in front of their houses? I said it was a bit surprising at first but on the mainland many families go to the cemetery to walk, and think and be one with their loved ones and the thought of always having your family close and right before you on your family property every day would be a special gift.

Next was another special journey to complete a circle that I was called to complete when I left the Mainland. To connect with a woman who had lost her husband on their sailing yacht. Until yesterday I was not clear how to locate her. In our work at an Elementary school we just happened to speak to the principal who said she had a cousin she had never met who just happened to be in the Port of Fangatongo on the day of the Tsunami and her husband was swept off their ship as the first of four waves came rolling into this narrow harbor.

He was topside loosening the lines from the boat so they could move into the deep water and she was below deck starting the motor. An incredibly harrowing story of survival. She and her adult son described their moving experience of the burial at sea.

A man who was quiet and not wanting to be part of a lot of attention they simply lived their lives quietly and so to their honor I will leave the rest to their personal journey to Honor, unpack through the years ahead. Her dilemma now? They need to find a way to get the yacht back to Florida before cyclone season begins.

Day 9: Sunday 10/11/2009

Today a bit of a mild day, White Sunday celebration in every church in American Samoa and at the Catholic Parish near our shelter Christ The King parish, when word from Pope Benedict XVI came to the people here through a letter from the Pro Nuncio of New Zealand the people were given a very special papal blessing and in his message a blessing and prayer of strength and support to the recovery workers, the entire congregation was deeply touched.

And during the presentation of the gifts once again the young people brought beautiful lei's and I was presented with one with purple flowers. After Mass I let the pastor know I planned to bring the papal blessing to a Mom who was Catholic, unable to leave her house due to the injuries of the tsunami and having lost her daughter she felt much anticipatory grief with today's coming White Sunday. The pastor removed his yellow and white swirled lei and gave it to me to bring to this Mother from the Pope and Him.

I went to their house just down the road and together husband and wife were on their porch resting in the shadow of their daughters burial site. I humbly came to Mom and said on behalf of our Holy Father and the Pastor of Christ the King Parish I bring you these leis and extend to you the prayers of our church and from Rome for you, your family and your daughter. I presented her the leis and one to her husband.

White Sunday which is such a celebration of children has taken new meaning in this home, and the mere thought that a prayer from the Holy Father was extended to them, has made such an incredible difference when words and actions often fail us. They were touched deeply and again lifted in spirit.

Peace this White Sunday American Samoa, Peace the world cannot give!

Day 11: Tuesday 10/13/09

Well today the plan was to start at the Samoan Community College and provide support to students and staff but when we arrived it was amazing the work they had already undertaken to support the students who returned back to school. Early reports are that at least 50 students and teachers have been impacted. We began planning the support and may look at some future teacher training ahead. Then we received word from South Pacific Academy about the planned funeral for the 11yr old student and her mother. The daughter has not yet been found. The funeral Mass was very powerful, to see the support of the Korean Community and Samoan Community was a true gift. There were at least six priests and the local bishop celebrating Mass. The teachers had asked that we attend as the students were attending as well. The husband and 8yr old daughter were surrounded with support and yet nothing could prepare one for the final farewell. As a husband and father I could not help but feel the father's pain and husband's grief losing such precious loves of your life. You could feel the overwhelming weight of grief as the single casket slowly descended into its burial place in this Catholic Cemetery. Falling to his knees as the final Samoan Farewell song was sung in five-part harmony, broken by the deep grief of those who wanted to help lift him up, but everyone there knew, this was a husband's goodbye and a father's grief that simply needed to be his own. The moment broke all of our hearts and the choir struggled to sing through their sorrow, he picked himself up, covered his face with both hands and took a deep breath as the service came to an end.

Once again with full dignity and honor this father and husband hugged his remaining child and then the family from Korea and around the world closed around him in an endless embrace...

And the sun continued to shine... On the outside...

Day 12: 10/14/09

If Friends are Friends Forever...

Our day began at 6am with the constant sound of torrential rains. The space we're in kept us sheltered from the direct rain but the wind and sound of huge drops of water pounding on the tin roof of this outdoor gymnasium with open walls on either side sounded like barrels upon barrels of marbles then golf balls dropping on it. Even with earplugs the roar was amazing. The water comes down in such volume that it easily overwhelms the drains. And when some of us awoke we had puddles around our cots.

So a quick change into the omni-dry shirts and were off. First to see our friends in Leone, parents of the little girl wanted one more visit. The grave now complete with beautiful blue and white tiles around the raised platform of her burial place. Her mother's hand and leg injuries from two weeks ago showed signs of physically healing. And Dad, for the first time appears to have completed one step also. The first of their sons has headed off to high school. And Mom speaks of wanting to possibly volunteer in the schools and read to children as a tribute to her daughter who loved when her

mom read to her. We spoke of the possible struggles she may have but this is as necessary for her because she is already anxious about everyone going back to school.

Next we met one on one with key students who had experienced very specific significant losses. I met a high school student who had seen five people die. His unique perspective has the potential of isolating him because so few are even talking about what they saw. He openly spoke about how the night remains the very hardest thing for him. He can only sleep in the daytime. We explored some techniques to help him cope with the images and thoughts that are associated with such trauma.

Then the entire school had a memorial for three people who were classmates or parents of the children in the school. And among the music and tributes was once again sung the Samoan Farewell song and a song written by the artist Michael W Smith called "Friends". In attendance the students, the family of the student who died with her mother and the child who lost her father. The tributes and the music were moving. After the service the kids of the 6th Grade escorted the family of their classmate who died, back to their classroom to show the family the pictures they had put together around their classmate's desk. They stayed long enough to read every tribute.

And we saw a young boy who was afraid to go back to school three days ago, there with his friends at school in his class.

And as we wrap up our fifth hour with these kids we head out in the late afternoon to the Western end of the Island to the village of Poloa through more torrential rains. Here we meet a family of boys, one who is 16 who had only this year learned to drive. Their village is high above the waters far from the threat of a tsunami. Yet a father's concern for his neighbors and his sons willingness to head to the waters edge to bring families to higher ground was truly heroic. And yet when they were near the bottom of this sole jungle mountain road, they met people telling them to quickly turn around. The father turned his car around gathered people and sped up the mountain road, not knowing that his son was trapped turning around this large SUV when the waters hit him. He quickly helped a woman who had fallen from a truck and then he began to run on foot up the mountain as the tsunami waters pushed his still running vehicle sideways towards him. Separated for just a short while, the father at the top of the mountain road realizes that his son has not yet returned. So he gets back into his car and heads down the mountain to save his son. When he reaches him running half-way the boy jumps into the father's car and says "the water hit my car."

For Dad, the worst thing for him was not knowing where his son was. And for the son, it was thinking that he might not live. Once he was safe in his home he simply collapsed. We spoke about his fear, his other friends and simply how scary this was for he and his Dad. His Dad said he hadn't had a chance to let it out since the tsunami. As a family they had been busy preparing for the wedding

of the older son which was scheduled for the weekend after the tsunami hit. All their family started arriving for the wedding two days after the tsunami. The wedding happened and now they finally had time to reflect on the impact of it all. And Dad shared that "the hardest part as a father was getting to the top of our winding mountain road and waiting for my son to arrive and him simply not being there."

He said, "it was just taking too long" as the tears flowed down his face. This moment with everyone gathered around the room and us around the dining room table was incredible as father and son shared how much they mean to each other.

(...and a friend will not say never, because the welcome will not end. And a lifetime's not too long; to live as friends. No, a lifetime's not too long to live as friends...)

DAY 13: Thursday 10/15/09

"When you spend your day with children you are renewed"

Under the shadow of Rainmaker Mountain was where we began and ended our day today in the village of AUA, with 300 students from the middle school just east of the capital of Pago Pago. Here students from K-3 (3yrs old) to 8th grade attend school and a 6th grade teacher noticed the great need among her students and heard about our support in other schools, high schools and the Community College. So the principal graciously welcomed us not only into one class but opened the entire school of 350 students to us. We started with 6th & 7th graders then 3rd & 4th graders, then 7th next 8th grades and finally 1st & 2nd graders and the day was done before we covered 5th grade. So we will be back here tomorrow.

So what was most significant about these kids? All were either at school or home at the time of the earthquake and beneath a huge mountain with a nearly completely vertical drop. And almost all saw a landslide happen as the sheer rocks fell when the earthquake happened. Then by the time the tsunami hit almost all were safe high up on the mountain. Among those in this school there were family deaths. No students lost but many have friends who lost homes or know at least two people who have died.

Across the board our message was to process the fears, speak of safety planning and above all provide concrete ways for everyone who says the nights are still the hardest. The emotional aftershocks are still causing sleepless nights and apparently just two days ago another aftershock was felt by many on the island and especially by the kids. The little ones simply start to cry.

So our plan for nights include a model provided by my colleague who is an excellent and most highly trained retired mental health expert from Spokane, WA. He suggests to each grade the Plan A Dream method, helping kids and adults alike to plan their

dreams. Rather than simply letting thoughts and images of the earthquake and tsunami fill their minds just before bedtime, we suggest that they draw their favorite place or image or happy dream and put it under their pillows and before they go to sleep think about the happy picture. We go back tomorrow after their first night's trial so they were told to give us a thumbs up or thumbs down tomorrow if it works.

One child in our talk asked if we had found his cousin yet who is 6yrs old and still lost. What a tough moment.

More later. Peace.

Stories from the front in American Samoa: Week 3

In this third week of reports, Tim Serban, Snohomish County Chapter American Red Cross volunteer in American Samoa, chronicles some devastating life-and-death situations that occurred during the actual tsunami event. (See Day 15: "Me O'l Bloomin Life").

Tim was deployed to American Samoa Friday, October 2, 2009 as member of the National Red Cross Response Team. Tim is the Director of Mission Integration and Spiritual Care with Providence Regional Medical Center Everett and has been a volunteer with Red Cross since 1999. His first volunteer training with the Red Cross was in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. Tim is thumb-typing these reports and sending them home using his I-pod mobile device--when connections are available.

Tim is due to return soon, but has been asked to extend his stay in American Samoa. Stay tuned to see what his decision will be.

To see the full report and photos, go to: <http://www.snohomishcounty.redcross.org/> .

Notes From: Tim Serban

American Red Cross Spiritual Care Response Team (SRT) Lead
Disaster Relief Operation (DRO) 560-Am. Samoa

DAY 14: FRIDAY 10-16-09

"Mommy we love you, Mommy we miss you"

Yesterday and today we met with more schools and saw over 370 kids in the past 24 hours. We missed the 5th grade yesterday so when we returned today all the other students we worked with yesterday and had given them a "plan a dream" model to help them get through the bad dreams at night, (nearly 100% of all children report not being able to sleep at night), so we walked them through an intentional exercise of thinking of a happy or pleasant dream drawing it on paper folding it and putting it under their pillow before sleeping.

Well today was the day later and they were to report back by giving us a thumbs up if it worked and thumbs down if it didn't and 80% of those we saw gave us a thumbs up, the others when asked, said they didn't remember their dreams but none of them had bad dreams. And best of all one older student who had lost her Mom came up to tell me that "it worked" she had a happy dream and "it helped her a lot." That one moment was worth our entire response.

We were asked by the family to attend a funeral today for a young mom whose family we have been supporting. She has 10 children the youngest is 6 yrs and she was with her Mom when the tsunami hit, she was found clinging to a bush in the water and was rescued by a neighbor boy. At the funeral, all the children were there and they together wrote the most beautiful song for their Mom in English and Samoan and the words of the song as I can remember are:

"Mommy we love you Mommy we miss you, Mommy we need you by our side.
Mommy we can't sleep well at night,
Mommy please come back...". And in the middle, the music got softer and the oldest boy came to the microphone and spoke the children's words of love for their Mom and the others hummed in the background until the one reading began to feel the depth of his loss as he spoke his words and soon all were crying.

But the music played on until they were ready and they sang the final line together holding hands. It was so moving, and the chiefs and village leaders expressed appreciation for Red Cross and at the grave-site asked if I would even offer a few words on behalf of Red Cross, and so I shared with them all that on behalf of our American Red Cross on the Mainland, I humbly extend to all our heartfelt prayers and support for them. I said to the children, that our prayer was that their mother's song will forever be sung in their hearts and souls and I reassured them all the People of American Samoa will always be carried in our hearts forever.

Tim
Tim Serban
SRT LEAD DRO 560 - American Samoa
Sent from my mobile device

DAY 15: SATURDAY 10-17-09

"Me O'I Bloomin Life"

Imagine what it's like to feel an earthquake on a sailboat moored in a harbor. It's just after 7:00am and you're having your morning coffee either with your family or on your single person sailing yacht. The first thought is that perhaps a very big ship has come into the harbor.

But for some reason the shaking doesn't stop. You look to the cement dock which is

permanently stationed in its place, the light pole on the dock is swaying violently back and forth and it just keeps getting worse. You call out to others and joke about if there is a chance of a tsunami in these parts? With the years of skill as a boat captain you quickly go below deck and pull up on the computer recent earthquakes and there it is, already registered a major quake 150 miles southwest of the American Samoan Island.

Quickly running a calculation in your head you know that tsunamis can travel 500 miles an hour means you have less than 18 minutes to get ready. You quickly run below deck, power up the engines and grab a serrated bread knife to cut the mooring lines, no motion is wasted. By the time you get above deck the loud popping of your 1/2 inch thick mooring lines echoes in your ears, with no warning you feel the boat begin to drop further and further below the permanent cement wall of the dock.

Only two lines remain connected as you feel the hull of the boat hit the bottom of the harbor and as it hits bottom the boat leans on it's side, all the water in Pago Bay is quickly draining out. By now the dock is too high for you to reach to run for safety. So you have your wife stand with the knife by the lines ready to cut them at your signal.

The motor is still running and in what feels like moments outside of time the first of what has been seen as three to four tsunami waves up to 25 feet high comes roaring in like a toilet bowl overflowing.

The boat now has gone from laying on the bottom of the sea floor to being rapidly lifted to the full length of the two mooring ropes nearly vertically straight up and over the cement dock. The bow is now at eye level with the top of the 20 foot light pole. As the first wave reaches it's crest you yell cut the lines now!

And in a split second the boat is free swirling around the light pole and you somehow manage to miraculously keep the boat straight and motor around the obstacles into deeper water.

Unaware that your fellow yacht-ee in the one-man yacht is in his yacht which is being swept away backwards down the main highway of Pago Harbor. For him the view of his mast hitting the power lines and as the mast comes crashing down four feet from you, you say to yourself I have to get someplace safe, and you realize you need to get below deck and hang on, because you have no motor, no rudder, and no control.

Together those who make it out begin to drive in circles in deep water for four hours.

When the water dropped from the first wave the cement dock looked like it was a waterfall of water flowing over it. They begin to assist in rescues and when they return to the dock, just 3 hrs later another tsunami warning has been sounded and all debate their next move. Fortunately there were no additional tsunami waves after the initial series of waves. And for these unique travelers of the sea, they are deeply moved at the loss of some of their own and humbled by the power of nature.

Earlier, we began the morning with home visits to the villages of Leone, Asilii and Pago

Harbor. Among those supported included a 17 yr old college student who had been struggling to cope with memories and panic following the earthquake and tsunami. In meeting with this student the anxiety was reported to be reducing and getting less each day. Support was provided to the entire family.

Next three more follow-up home visits were provided to this side of the Island. As we travel, more and more young people are out playing any variety of sporting games, from football, volleyball, cricket, baseball, soccer and basketball. All of this is a good sign following a disaster.

Next I had the chance to check in on the yachting sailboat community that found themselves impacted by the tsunami. Specifically, a family from the Island of St. Thomas who have a 6yr old on board. When asked how long he's been living on a boat, this blonde haired happy little child squints one side of his entire face and looks up at me with one eye open and a sneer across his mouth and says in his best Australian Pirate voice, "Arggg, I've been livin on this boat 'All me Bloomin Life' Matey". It was priceless, he was asked to tell me a joke and before he got too far he said, did you ever hear why... And then he says to himself "oh no I can't tell that one to ya, and his parents agree.". So he settles for the milder G rated joke when he asks "What do you call two banana peels? I said, I don't know what do you call two banana peels? He said, you call them "Slipper's" or with his accent, ("slipp-ahs").

And the stories above were shared and combined from about three different perspectives on the dock today.

Sent from my mobile device

Tim Serban
SRT DR LEAD DR-560 -American Samoa
Sent from my mobile device

DAY 16: SUNDAY 10-18-09

"Advice from the children of American Samoa to the children of the next disaster"

In the beginning of this response these were the questions we heard:
Will it happen again?

Why are there so many different stories about how our friend who died?

Will my parents die?

We heard there is going to be another one on this day and time?

Do you really mean it when you say you care about us?

What do you get from being a volunteer with Red Cross?

Should we force our children to go back to school?

Have you found my cousin, who's still missing?

And as time has progressed the children were asked, When we go out to another disaster there will be kids involved just like you. What advice would you have us share with them, to help them cope with their disaster?

So far this is our list:

1. Be Strong, Have Faith! (Natalie P.)
2. It's okay to cry and be sad.(for both boys and girls)
3. Don't be sad, you always have an Angel by your side.
4. Be Ready, Be Prepared!
5. Say a Prayer so you can be comfortable.
6. Children! Don't Worry!
7. Write a Plan!
8. "Plan Your Dreams"
9. Be Healthy!
10. Be Helpful!

And this evening it was our day off Sunday and a Mother brought her children over because they saw me at Mass and wanted to talk before we left. So I met with Val (17y) and Van (9y) in a corner of our staff shelter. I first taught Van the "fist-bump-blow-it-up" and we talked "earthquake, tsunami, nights, fears, dreams and safety plan" and then we shot some baskets and Val sunk the perfect three point shot over my head, the best happy memory image she could use as she planned her dreams.

Good night American Samoa.

Tim

Tim Serban

SRT Lead DR-560 - American Samoa

Sent from my mobile device

DAY 17: MONDAY 10-19-09

"A Cool Wind Blows"

When I started reflecting in these Situation Reports about 17 days ago, I found myself using them as my opportunity to connect with the outside world of my lead in Washington D.C. And having been on a disaster or two, I know the need to keep it flowing. But I have really only done this as my way to process a bit of the intensity of the incredible work that over 80 volunteers are doing on this island in big and small ways. Some never get the chance to see the people in need because their role is to be

the bridge at headquarters to ensure that everyone that is needed gets in and out safely. There are those who manage the stuff they get, the donated supplies, and find amazing ways to divide them up, unpack, sort and repack everything from gloves and flashlights to water, rice and tuna packages. They move the small army of volunteers through their paces in setting up tents to making sure when staff return each evening, no one is left behind. There are those who partner with others who create an incredible bridge of safety, shelter, food, physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

Volunteers are here to do a job and when they return at night, they collapse on their cots, some young, some old, but all convinced they are here for a great purpose, to meet the unmet need as best we can. And the wave of Mickey Mouse dolls arrived for us to bring to the kids, young and old.

So it does take the team around the world to do what we do on the ground. And it brings me back to the day. As some days go there are a few starts and stops and then falls for support. Families called due to their needs for basics, food and water. And before the spirit is at peace the basics need to be met.

So as we headed to the harbor again to find a few people who had requested support, another aftershock was felt across the island and some key places began to evacuate.

So we went to the mountain top to wait for a little while. Night is well underway into Tuesday morning and the sights are busy people quickly distributing many donated supplies across this island. And we saw that these families are facing new challenges after the funerals.

Without all involved and without the generous support of so many individuals and companies, we couldn't do what we do to help those in need. It's about supporting the needs of those who are caring for others.

And the cool wind is the many behind the scenes locally and around the world that make this possible for us to bring our support here.

Tim
Tim Serban
SRT Lead DR-560 - American Samoa
Sent from my mobile device

DAY 18: TUESDAY 10-20-09

"We Love You" "Oh Fa'aftai"

Well days are running into nights and nights into days, and it's getting harder to remember what day it is and just where we've been.

Today a significant home visit was with a woman who wasn't sure she needed support

until we were there. She had lost her Mother in the tsunami. She apologized for her sparsely furnished home and the fact that her walls were nearly completely bare, except for a picture of Jesus and Mary on one wall. When I looked closely I could see that her walls had nails in various places where a picture should be but no pictures.

She said she took them all down. I asked, "you took what all down?" Pictures of my Mother. They were all over my walls because my Mom meant so much to me. Tell us about taking the pictures down? She said, if I took them down I thought I wouldn't think about it so much, I asked if it was working, she said "no". She told us that her Mom always fussed over her because she was the baby of a family of 11 children. She shared that if we had come by last week, we would have never been able to see her. Why? "Because I had locked myself in my room for a week. I just missed my mom so much and I was so sad.

"You see she died taking one of my Aunts to work."
But I blame myself because I was supposed to take my Aunt that morning and I told my Mom I was too tired to get up. My Mom then said that she would take her. If I had taken my aunt that day my Mom would still be alive. When asked where she might be? She said "it would have been me who died not her."

And I said and if that happened it would have been her we were visiting today not you. And she said "yes!" And if this were the case; because we have seen Moms who have lost daughters and daughters who have lost moms, what do you think your Mom would be saying if it were you? She replied, "when I think about it, she would be saying the same thing that I am saying." So she would be blaming herself? Yes came the reply. Sometimes when we blame ourselves we usually end up back in the same place where we started, and so if you have moments when you blame yourself can I suggest you do one more thing? She said "yes." I continued, "take the five more minutes at the end of that time and imagine that your Mom is here with you, and think about what would she be saying to you if she could? "She would tell me that she would want me to keep going for my children and that it was her choice to go that day. And if it meant her dying to save her baby, then she would do that."

"My mommy was a tough woman and she would probably yell at me and say you have to be strong for your babies now.". And this young Mom who lost her Mommy realized why she needed the support today. She said, I can't thank you enough. I think I will go outside today, and tomorrow, I think I will go back to work too.

We then spent the midday at the American Samoan Community College providing support to individual students and teachers who were hit by the tsunami and rescued many people. One group of young men rescued at least 8 people from certain death and because of their efforts and those of the entire village of Amanave, no one died that day.

But the emotional aftershocks keep them from going to sleep at night. So we offered support around the images they see in their minds of this earthquake that lasted a very

long time and the wall of water that quickly came upon them. Tomorrow we will check if our support worked. We met around a hand-made wood table that had a small inscription on it with the words of the college motto in Samoan, "Seek Knowledge".

And our day continued with a home visit to the village near Pago Harbor where a family of 13 adult children sat where their sister had died, they were sitting in what used to be the kitchen of the house, but the only thing there was the cement foundation of the house and now a temporary tarp carport tent over folding chairs. In front of them was this formerly two-story house, and the only thing left was the top floor as the first floor was completely washed away. Now the top story of this house looked as if it were made of rubber and was picked up off the first floor, twisted sideways off the foundation and set on the ground and when you look into it, the floor molded with the hilly ground. Inside the unsafe structure the three sons 16-25 yrs old talk about their Mom.

And we ended our day with the Governor of American Samoa who asked to share his gratitude to the American Red Cross by hosting an ice cream social for our workers. The depth of gratitude is heard in this song of thanks and love.

The word for thanks is "Fa'aftai"

Tim
Tim Serban
SRT Lead DR 560 - American Samoa
Sent from my mobile device

DAY 19: WEDNESDAY 10-21-09

"How can we be grounded, when we're on a sphere hurling through space?"

Today was a day at the American Samoan Community College counseling classes for support. Over 60 students today were supported with their teachers about their experiences throughout the earthquake and tsunami.

Lessons learned:

1. We are pretty good having a plan when were at school. Not so good talking about a plan at home, but we all feel home is one of the safest places across the board, kids and adults alike. Regardless if it is true or not.
2. We tell our kids to be safe and yet we risk life and limb to get to them in a disaster, even if it means going into the danger. And when they are safe on the mountain, some of us go back down alone to get our frail elderly parents.
3. We tell everyone to head to higher ground yet if we are a leader we stay behind and hope our kids will do what we say and not what we do.

4. We listen to predictions of future earthquakes and tsunamis and our children know them better than us. And it drives us crazy thinking about what we should do. And one prediction actually happened on 10/19 which caused even the most skeptical to listen. But the danger is that some of our kids are asking so why should we study? Should we stay in school? If they don't go to school and it is true, what can we do differently? Do we lock ourselves in a room and stop living?

5. So what do we do when danger is possible? We have a plan, we get prepared and we talk about how to be safe not just at home or school, but everywhere in between. If everyone in a family was absolutely convinced that all the family had a plan to head up the mountain after an earthquake then we wouldn't be going back to check and make sure.

6. When we see a hurricane approaching we have a warning but we generally don't have warnings with earthquakes. Students are asking what they should do. Our advice? Live their life to the fullest, learn and grow in school and do what they love also.

And to top off an amazing day, I ran into the woman we had seen yesterday who had lost her mother in the tsunami and had taken the pictures of her down and locked herself in her room for a week last week. Well, I happened to be walking by the place where she worked and she was dressed in her finest professional office clothing, wearing earrings and she noticed me and said Tim? I said yes, not recognizing her and she said it's me, from yesterday, you came to my house. I nearly hit the floor, she was just finishing her first full day at work since the tsunami and she looked like a completely different person. She said, thanks for helping me get the strength to leave my house.

And another example of the phrase "there are no such things as coincidences", when we just happen to be there at the same time & place.

Resilience is incredible.

Do what you Love, and Love what you do!

FINAL DAY 10/22/09 THURSDAY/FRIDAY

On my final day on the Island I spent the day going from Poloa to Tula which is from one end of the Island to the other. Village by village I would see the children and some families that we have supported in the past weeks through this emergent and initial recovery phase. The work connecting with those who have made requests for support is ongoing and will be led by the local Department of Health and Human Services teams along with some arriving who will be part of the long term disaster recovery process.

Where to begin to describe the incredible and heart-wrenching goodbye last night at 11pm at the Pago Airport. At least 60-70 of those of us from Red Cross were heading

out with our Americorps students who joined us on day one to support everything from distributing over 1 million bottles of water, then large coolers with flashlights gloves and essential supplies to helping FEMA distribute and set up tents and ongoing food and supplies all through this deployment.

So we arrived at the airport at 7pm for the one 11:50pm flight that flies out this week. And as we waited for ticketing, crowds upon crowds of families, young and old, soon overwhelm the area, more than the number of travelers traveling tonight and as I wait in line with colleagues I hear my name from a little fourth grader "Hi Tim" and then another asking if I remember coming to their class, and I do.

Then the words I've been asking all week to kids and adults across the island: "Oh wAh My Oy (O A Mai Oi) Mr Tim?". And How are you Mr Tim?

From a sixth grader and I give her the term I taught them, thumb sideways "SoSo". And the kids laugh because they just really think it's funny when we say just soso.

I'm met by Dr Jean Asuega and Dr Heather Wilson the only two psychologists on the island whom we have been working with so incredibly closely to help the needs of so many. Together they made it possible for us to get into the homes and schools across the island. American Samoa owes these two champions of emotional and mental health for the people of this island a huge debt of gratitude.

They are here to say good-bye and bearing some very special gifts they send us forth and the greatest gift is that of their hearts and that alone is a priceless gift.

And from the darkness of the outdoor ticketing line I see a familiar face of Taitasi Fitiau and her husband Faataui, sons Raven and Phoenix all standing together to see me. They are the parents of dear Vaijoresa 6yrs old who died in the tsunami and this family whom we have become very close traveled to the airport despite Mom's pneumonia to present me with two of the most beautiful lei's I have ever seen and the tears and hugs never ended. I couldn't believe they were there. I will forever hold their words in my heart.

And before departure another young woman came to me and said Tim please accept this lei as a tribute to my Neice Puhee Woo 11yrs old and her Mother who died in Asilii. This was the sixth grader's family that we have supported the school and family in their difficult tragedy.

And I spend these moments hearing the crowd of young people share hugs with their Americorps friends and tears and laughter combine as they say how very much we will be missed. And as each one enters the security zone a cheer resounds as they yell "Fa'aaftai Aurie" (Thank You) and each name as they go behind the doors.

There is something very special about this island and people. I guess you can also say there is something about the fact that there is only one flight during the week that makes it pretty easy for anyone to say goodbye.

So we walk the outdoor journey to the back entrance of the 767-300 and from behind us in one resounding chorus the young people of American Samoa found their way to see us by the fence and we hear "goodbye Red Cross We love You!

And I look to the night sky and see the most incredible familiar group of stars shining brightly in the Southwest sky, Pleades; the stars that look like a little kite are out to shine the way home.

And as I sit here in Honolulu Airport waiting alone to come home I see an Envelope of letters from the kids and I peeked at a couple but I am just not yet ready to open them all yet.

Knowing that this day that began at 6am on Thursday Samoan time will be complete at 9:50pm Friday Night Seattle time.

Good Night American Samoa, my new extended Family, and so long Red Cross Colleagues who come together in a moments notice to sleep on cots and brave amazing conditions and uncertainty to make a difference in a disaster and hopefully inspire others to one day volunteer to help us when an earthquake or tsunami hits our back yard.

And for the ones with whom I worked and partnered, Lyle O'Neel from Spokane you are a true colleague professional and friend. And Earl Johnson in DC you are the best!

And Good Morning my Family, Carla and Joe I will see you TONIGHT , I'm ready to collect all those Velcro (aka sticky hugs) from you Joseph! Love Daddy...