

Santa Barbara News-Press
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BUILDING BLOCKS

Santa Barbaran joined relief effort in Pakistan

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'It's a race against time' in quake-ravaged Pakistan



Upon arriving in earthquake-ravaged Pakistan a month ago, it didn't take Santa Barbara resident Brett Williams long to realize he was witnessing history.

Nor did it take him long to make his mark, changing the way the United Nations is handling the ongoing disaster relief effort. His novel idea: Use the rubble to rebuild the houses.

Mr. Williams, a 25-year-old operations manager with Goleta-based Direct Relief International, was sent to ground zero by the nonprofit organization to help it deliver medical supplies to the right people.

It was a grisly, dangerous task. For backup, Mr. Williams brought along 46-year-old Matt George, a friend and a Navy veteran from Newport Beach, who, among other things, helped him negotiate with some obstinate village leaders. Mr. Williams returned home on Thursday; Mr. George -- who has a nonprofit organization of his own, Surf Zone Relief Operations -- remains in Pakistan.

On Oct. 8, a record-setting earthquake measured at a magnitude 7.6 rocked the Third World country. The death toll is at 80,000 and counting.

Locals near the epicenter -- near the city of Muzzafarad -- said the ground rose five feet, collapsed and shook like Jell-O for six minutes.

To put the enormity into perspective, Mr. Williams said to imagine scores of 10-mile-long mudslides consuming roads from Santa Barbara to La Conchita. Add to that how many of the estranged mountain villages are composed of ramshackle huts -- and how winter is rapidly approaching.

"There's another wave of death coming," said Mr. Williams, speaking from an office at DRI. "It's a race against time."

Two days after their plane touched down, the Santa Barbara friends saw the Nagasaki-like devastation of entire cities and towns. "It was flat; nothing was standing," said Mr. Williams, a graduate of Santa Barbara High School and UCLA, where he majored in history. "Full buildings had fallen into the river and the river had changed its course to move around the debris."

At first, their mission was only two-pronged: Bring supplies to people and learn which people needed more supplies. But in the process of village-hopping, they noticed hundreds of men, sitting around in a languid daze.

It seemed an untapped well of energy. The stepson of a local contractor, Mr. Williams also noticed how much of the wood from people's houses, though badly warped, was still usable.

On a whim, in the remote village of Ratnoi, he sketched a quick blueprint on a piece of scratch paper and pulled aside a man who knew English.

They scared up a hammer, approached a mangled home, untangled some tin sheets and used them to build a new frame. Before long, they were joined by 20 other men.



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The idea earned Mr. Williams and Mr. George a meeting with Andrew MacLeod, chief of operations for the United Nations Emergency Coordination Centre in Pakistan. Later, Mr. MacLeod, sold by their progress, brought the duo to a Pakistani major general, who agreed to expand the program.

Now, along with delivering rescue workers scores of tents, U.N. helicopters also drop off shelter kits designed by the Santa Barbara men.

Each contains a hammer, some nails, a shovel, pickax, waterproof tarp and blanket. The kits, he said, are lighter and cheaper than tents, and seem to serve the population better because

of the frigid conditions.

Before ripping into the rubble of the shanties, Mr. Williams was careful to ask family members if the bodies of any loved ones were inside. Often, he and his partner worked amid the stench of decaying corpses, most of them buried impenetrably deep within the refuse.

Alix Mattingly, a former board member of DRI who recently started working there as an employee, said hearing about Mr. Williams' experience impressed upon her the grim reality of the tragedies the organization regularly works to ameliorate from afar.

"We send \$170 million worth of products (a year) around the world," she said. But "a lot of it is theoretical when you're sitting in this building."

As for Mr. Williams, he said the experience has changed his life.

"Pakistan is such a mystical place," he said.

"This is an ancient, ancient, ancient culture. They took me in like I was their brother."



PHOTOS:

LEN WOOD / NEWS-PRESS PHOTO

Brett Williams of Direct Relief International says the arrival of winter threatens the survivors of last month's earthquake in Pakistan.

COURTESY DIRECT RELIEF INTERNATIONAL

Brett Williams surveys the destruction caused by the earthquake that shook Pakistan. He meets with survivors.