

Answering the Call by Jivan Joti Kaur

When Guru Terath Singh, Guru Simran Kaur (Ranch), and Christi (Wahe Guru Kaur's Mom) and I started training with the Red Cross last May, we had no idea that we would have our first real disaster right here in our own backyard.

Last Thursday, the media announced that everyone's gas would be turned off in Northern New Mexico; I received an email from the NM Red Cross to be on alert that we would be setting up a shelter in Espanola and Taos. By 2:30 that afternoon, we were at the Senior Center setting up cots and supplies. Within an hour, we were moved to the National Guard Armory, because it was thought we would need more space.

That first night was grueling; we didn't have any heat for the first few hours. The National Guard brought in generators and set up giant propane heaters with huge tubes to suck out the fumes. The National Guard was incredible. They worked tirelessly to help us in any way they could - cleaning toilets, washing pots, and moping the floors. We felt safe with them there.

In the beginning we had mostly elderly guests - who had special needs - which we were not equipped to serve. During the night, two soiled themselves, and one had chest pains, requiring her to go to the hospital. By the next day, things were beginning to settle. We were able to get the neediest elderly admitted to nursing homes. As the Espanola Schools didn't have gas, there was no school. Their cooks made food for us in an Abiquiu school, run on propane, and Matamandir Singh organized trays of food to come over. Over the five days we were open, many restaurants, casinos, and stores sent over food and supplies for us (Cowgirl, Big Dog, La Cocina, Big Rock, Inn of the Delta, Wal-Mart, Whole Foods, and more). Our Shelter Manager, Christi was constantly on the phone, asking for food. But, sometimes it just happened. Just when we thought we were going to run out of food, someone would walk in with food. It seemed like all we had to do was voice our needs. For example, Monday (our last day), we were out of milk for the kids. "Gosh, we need milk for the kids." Within an hour, someone from Tesuque Market walked in with milk for the kids. It was awesome.

The response to this disaster was a whole city (whole state) effort. We (The Red Cross) were working alongside the Police, the Fire Department, Emergency Services, the Hospital, the Mayor's Office, the National Guard, and more. Many came to the RC Shelter to check in with us and eat our food. A Sun Reporter, Casper, came daily to talk to us and guests and write articles. I learned a lot about the working of our city...and some politics, which the Red Cross tries to avoid.

The Shelter was a happening place. Not only were we serving food to hundreds a day, guests brought a lot of spirit as well. One of our guests was an older gentleman, Raymundo, who won the hearts of everyone playing old favorites on his harmonica. There were also two ruddy-skinned, long-haired brothers, Larry and Jose, who made a point of mopping and cleaning every evening. Three volunteers, who had experience in the restaurant field, just showed up off the street and organized our food – what should be eaten first, next, or thrown away. Their 11-year old daughter, Rachel, took it upon herself to mop the floor a couple of times a day. The mop was almost as large as she was. Johnnie, from the Public Education Department, came over every day to check on us. She set up games for people to play. At times, we felt like a recreation center.

Thank you to Matamandir Singh and kitchen crew for making meals. Whenever I called, all he said was “how much do you need by when.” It was incredible. And thank you Prakash, Hari Jot Singh, and Siri Deva Singh for coming over on Monday to help us breakdown the cots. The Sikhs were definitely present and appreciated.

There are many aspects to a disaster. A side-effect that the Red Cross was also responding to was the fires. When there is a local fire, the Fire Department calls the local Red Cross (namely the four of us and sometimes volunteers from Los Alamos). During the gas outage, there were many fires, because people used their fireplaces and space heaters, sometimes without caution. The local Red Cross shows up and comforts the victims (it’s always a huge shock and loss), evaluates what help they need and often puts them up in a local hotel and gives them a limited-amount credit card to use at Wal-Mart for clothes and food. Did you know that our local hotels will put up people in need, free of charge, for a night or two? Pretty cool, huh?

The great thing about the Red Cross is that it serves anyone, no matter what their politics, religion, beliefs. Therefore, the Red Cross is one of the only organizations in the world that is trusted and called upon to serve in any country or situation. They train their volunteers, free of charge. Guru Terath Singh, Guru Simran, Christi and I have taken courses like, Orientation to the Red Cross, Running a Shelter, First Aid, CPR, Case Management, Mental Health First Aid, Health Services (for Medical Professionals), and Disaster Mental Health (for Mental Health Professionals). There is a great emphasis on not over-taxing their volunteers, making sure they take breaks and so forth. Volunteers, who are sent out have their travel paid for and housed and fed. We have met so many really wonderful people already.

It’s funny. Our first big disaster came to us. We are grateful that we were trained and ready when it did. I feel the Siri Singh Sahib’s warm smile. We are in great need of more local volunteers for the Red Cross, although once trained, you would be eligible to respond to

national and international disasters as well. If anyone is interested or has questions, please contact Jivan Jot Kaur at 505-753-6241 or jivanjotikaur@gmail.com. Sat Nam and Blessings.