

SEARCH AND RESCUE

What does emergency preparedness mean to you? In the Dominican Republic, it means these young men and young women are ready to lend a hand.

BY RICHARD M. ROMNEY
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They help people injured in car accidents. They rescue drowning swimmers and find hikers or cave explorers who get lost or hurt. On holidays they operate sidewalk booths to assist those in trouble. They help with community vaccination programs. And they know what to do in an earthquake, hurricane, or other disaster.

They are trained in basic and advanced first aid, water rescue, confined-space rescue, disaster response, and survival skills. They know their training manuals and classroom drills, but they also train in the outdoors, hiking into the mountains and caves where they simulate real dangers. Then they take on actual emergencies.

Since they were organized in 2003, they have helped more than 300 people, many with serious or critical injuries. They have also drawn a lot of teens from the troubled streets into their ranks and taught them about discipline and love.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD M. ROMNEY



The Comité de Emergencias Santo de los Últimos Días (the Latter-day Saint Emergency Committee) includes both Latter-day Saints (above) and other members of the community (left) who are trained and ready to help.

Service Oriented

They are the *Comité de Emergencias Santo de los Últimos Días*, the Latter-day Saint Emergency Committee, a volunteer group open to anyone willing to follow their rules of courtesy and service. And at their core are teenage Latter-day Saints, led by dedicated adults. More than 200 youth have participated in the group since it began.

“I found out about the committee when I came to a baptismal service one Saturday,” says Junior Rivera. “In another room, I saw all these kids like me, dressed in black, with a logo on their T-shirts and hats, learning about first aid. What really got me interested was when I found out they were preparing to help other people. I saw it as a way to do something good, and that’s part of Church teachings, to reach out and help those around us.”

Onel Rodriguez explains that the group learns procedures similar to gospel principles. “For example,” he says, “in an emergency we learn to take care of our own families first. Then when we know they are all right, we are able to assist others. That’s what the Church teaches about welfare. Take care of your own family; then help others.”

Franklin de los Santos says working on disaster preparedness has helped him realize that sometimes the need for spiritual search and rescue is just as important as physical care. “Some people need a helping hand or a kind word or a shared testimony to help them be strong,” he



Committee members like Franklin de los Santos (above) are trained using proper equipment and techniques. As well as assisting with search and rescue, they provide additional services to the community, such as helping with emergency preparedness and with vaccination programs.

says. “When we’re living the gospel, we should care about and strengthen other people spiritually too.”

Application Oriented

Omar Rodriguez points out that many of the committee’s activities have been used to fulfill Duty to God requirements and have been planned in coordination with Aaronic Priesthood and Mutual activities.

José Núñez, second counselor in La Caleta Ward bishopric, says that while youth learn the gospel in their classes and quorums, the committee helps them apply what they learn to everyday life. “When they’re in the street having direct contact with needy people, then they



really learn what it means to love one another,” he says. “They develop love for the people around them. And they also develop love for themselves because they learn about self-discipline, and that gives them confidence to act in appropriate ways no matter where they are.”

Brother Núñez also points out that the committee doesn’t replace the normal activities of the Church. “It complements them,” he says. “In priesthood quorums and Young Women classes, for example, they are taught gospel principles. But in gospel-oriented activities like the committee and other service projects, they have the opportunity to practice what they have learned.” That’s one of the ways, he says, that they can become “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

Community Oriented

Omar says the committee is often asked to help with community programs like measles vaccinations. “We want to be present wherever help is needed,” he says, “and the community knows that. They trust us because we prepare well.” In fact, the *comité*, founded by Church members Basilio Cabrera and Domingo Peralta, uses the same techniques as Red Cross and civil defense units. The public health department has given the LDS-sponsored group special recognition, and the governments of the city and the province have also given the group awards.

Brother Núñez explains that the committee creates emergency-response plans according to a study of critical

zones in Santo Domingo and nearby communities. “In an emergency we would go into those zones and determine if there are members of the Church who need help,” he says. “At the same time, we would assess the needs of all the people in that area and report to authorities. We have identified which places would be most critical in the case of a cyclone, earthquake, flood, or something similar. We know which areas will need an immediate evacuation. We even know where tree branches can be trimmed to avoid damage if high winds come. This is part of what the youth are assigned to do.”

Committee members also give up some of their own celebration time at Christmas and Easter so that, under adult supervision, they can participate in a 24-hour watch. “We do this because these are the days when a lot of people get into accidents or have trouble because they are drinking,” Brother Núñez says. That fact has taught committee members, in a very practical way, the value of living the Word of Wisdom (see D&C 89).



Ready, Willing, Motivated

So why do committee members give up time to serve? Why go through all that training?

Omar says that although being involved requires time and effort, it’s worth it. He feels particularly good that he can help other people, something he learned a lot about after tropical storm Noel. “Our duty was to help those in need to get clothing and food,” he says. “I saw people who were suffering, and to be able to bring them something to wear and something to eat and then to see their satisfaction, that made me feel good.”

Osiris Rodriguez says he appreciates the unity he feels in the committee. He sees it as an extension of the unity he feels in his quorum and among the youth in the Church in general.

Junior Batista, who joined the Church several months ago, said that when he learned about the emergency committee, he was eager to be involved. And he hasn’t been disappointed. “We feel good because we are fulfilling the commandment that says we should love one another. We are together as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of God.”

When you feel that way about service, you will continue to serve. ■

Note: If you desire to start a similar committee, please check first with your priesthood leaders and local government officials.

Why do committee members give up time to serve? Why make the effort to go through all that training? Participants say they feel good because they are fulfilling the commandment to love and serve those around them.



Osiris Rodriguez



Junior Rivera



Junior Batista



José Núñez