Parent Care: Laudable coping during evacuations

by Marsha_Kay_Seff

Someone asked me during the recent firestorms in California how to mitigate the stress on older folks. My answer: "Everyone is stressed. If we're smart, we'll look to our parents for hints about coping. Obviously, they didn't get to be octogenarians without learning to deal with stress."

Our parents, indeed, were troupers. And so were the communities that opened their hearts and doors to retirement-home evacuees. Homes with extra beds made them available. Facilities that ran out of bedrooms converted public spaces, piling mattresses on the floors.

Among the dozens of retirement organizations that pitched in was San Diego's St. Paul's Senior Homes and Services, which turned its dining room into a dormitory; meanwhile, residents graciously ate in the lobby. At a moment's notice, St. Paul's welcomed 34 guests from Mount Miguel Covenant Village, in Spring Valley, Calif., with hot face towels and lemonade.

Churches and synagogues also hosted the displaced. Temple Beth Israel in the La Jolla neighborhood of San Diego, hosted 130 folks from San Diego County's Seacrest Village, serving bagels and kosher meals, even setting up movies and bingo. Though admittedly scared, the evacuees settled into their temporary homes without complaint.

Reva Beck, an 84-year-old resident of Seacrest, waited out the fire at the temple, making the best of her adventure. Like the others, all she had with her were the clothes she was wearing, her purse and medications.

"It wasn't a good time, but the people there were unbelievable," she says. They treated us like royalty. If the queen of England came there, she couldn't have been treated better."

Afraid she wouldn't be able to get up from the floor, Reva slept on chairs the first night. The next day, volunteers piled up two mattresses for her.

"I don't know how, but they all knew my name. The food was wonderful. They even put the cream cheese on our bagels, so we shouldn't have to do it ourselves."

Paradoxically, one of Reva's granddaughters had her bat mitzvah in the temple earlier this year, and the proud granny didn't miss an opportunity to share that tidbit with her roommates.

Her daughter, Beverly Beck Ellman of San Diego, was evacuated herself and staying with her adult daughter. Knowing Reva was OK helped ease the family's anxiety.

"I felt it was God's will she was at Beth Israel where Ari was bat mitzvahed. That was her last memory of being there, her proudest moment," Beverly says.

Across town at St. Paul's, staff and even administrator Cheryl Wilson, greeted visitors with five-star hospitality.

Beth Price, an 86-year-old from Mount Miguel, was one of them. According to her stepdaughter, Lucy Price-Murofushi of San Diego County, Beth, who initially was evacuated to San Diego High School, is paralyzed on her left side and needs a mechanical lift to get out of bed. But she was pleased to be able to choose her own bed in the dining room, settling on the one under a Mediterranean painting.

"I was so impressed with St. Paul's; she got such good care," Lucy says. "They bathed the visitors and even gave them clothing from storage. I found Beth sitting in beautiful black slacks and a blue flowered blouse, looking lovely. I'm really proud of her; she was very pleasant and not complaining."

During the three days her stepmother was there, the staff even invited Lucy's Australian shepherd mix to visit.

Marsha Kay Seff is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's www.sandiegoeldercare.com, a Web site for older folks and their caregivers. She can be reached by email.

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