

American Red Cross Tampa Bay: Not Just There in an Emergency

Written by Deborah Kelley

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Its red emblem is as recognizable as the golden arches; a single crimson cross centered on a plain white square. It is proof to those in desperation that help has finally arrived. But there is so much more to the American Red Cross Tampa Bay than natural disaster relief.

Explains CEO Anna Trefethen, "Last year here in Tampa Bay, 122,000 people were directly assisted by us on a day-to-day basis. We respond almost every single day to a local disaster, primarily family fires and we take care of each person in the family, on the average we will serve 1400 people each year for local disasters."

Another less known, mandated service is offered to armed forces. "We respond to about 1800 emergency messages a year. What those are, are individual family members who need to get in contact with their loved one overseas. They use us as the vehicle for that contact. An example if a serviceman's wife is having a baby - we make that contact. We send both good news and bad news. A lot of times the serviceperson may be needed to come home, so we work with the military to get him home. It could be the death of a parent or serious illness of a spouse." Trefethen adds, "As a matter of fact, that's how I started with the Red Cross."

After graduating college, Trefethen had two choices for employment, the Red Cross and an area hospital. When she went to see her father, he told her that the Red Cross has been his "light in the darkness" when he was serving his country during World War II. "The Red Cross contacted my dad and helped him come home for his father's funeral." Nearly nineteen years later, Trefethen has never wavered in her decision.

The American Red Cross Tampa Bay not only responds to emergencies and assists military personnel, but instructs the community in a variety of vital health and safety classes ranging from life-saving CPR and first aid to swimming, life-guarding, babysitter training and nurse assistance training.

Volunteers are welcome at all ages; however, under 18 must be accompanied by an adult volunteer. "We will work with them on training and placement. We provide volunteers for the VA Hospital and other area hospitals like Memorial. We have 2,000 registered volunteers at our chapter and 600 of them are specifically trained for disaster response," says Trefethen. "We have volunteers called Disaster Action Team members who are on-call twenty-four hours a day. Those are the volunteers that go to the local disasters, though they are also trained to respond to large disasters. They can also be called out of the Tampa Bay area to assist in situations like Hurricane Ike or Gustav."

The most transforming moment in her time with the Red Cross was her first devastating disaster. “You never forget that first time where you are helping in the community and you walk through a neighborhood and every house is destroyed. Your stomach is clenched, but you are there as the lifeline. People see the Red Cross as you will help them through that. We will help them rebuild their life. We give them the hugs, food, clothing- get their basic needs taken care of. We’re only thinking about what they need right then and what they need most is simply someone to lean on. When you are that person in that moment, it is life transforming.”

When a disaster strikes and the troop of trained Red Cross volunteers are called to help, no doubt Trefethen will be proud to lead their way.

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