

Shaken and Stirred

Insights from an Epicenter of the Human Spirit

First Major Quake

7.1 magnitude
4:35 a.m. Sept. 4, 2010,
while the city slept.

Second Major Quake

6.3 magnitude
12:51 p.m. Feb. 22, 2011,
while many pedestrians were
coming and going for lunch.

Third Major Quake

6.3 magnitude
June 13, 2011,
providing the third punch
that knocked the hope of
recovery from so many.

Since moving to Christchurch, New Zealand in 2008 to pursue doctorate degrees, UCO alumni Lane (BBA '05, MEd '06) and April Perry (BA '05, MEd '07), have watched their adoptive city experi-

ence three major earthquakes with thousands more smaller quakes and aftershocks. In the following, April Perry shares some of their experiences while living overseas in an on-going disaster zone.

The Three Big Quakes

It was 4:35 a.m. Sept. 4, 2010, when we woke to what felt like someone violently shaking our bed, repeatedly picking it up and slamming it down. Then there were the noises, the sounds of our pictures crashing, mirrors shattering, and the TV taking a suicide dive onto the floor. Within seconds we knew it was an earthquake. All we could do was hold on to one another and hope it would end soon.

That quake was a 7.1 magnitude, the same as the Haiti earthquake in early 2010 that killed thousands of people. Our adopted city took a brutal beating that day, with an estimated \$2 billion worth of damage. Miraculously, not a single person was killed. What we didn't know, though, was that this was only the beginning of the 10,000-plus earthquakes and aftershocks our city would endure over the next 18 months — including two more major quakes.

The second major quake came during lunch hours when people

were outside on Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2011, a warm summer day, only the second day of a new semester at the University of Canterbury. At this point, we all considered ourselves “experts” in handling earthquakes, having experienced thousands of aftershocks since the 7.1 quake six months earlier. However, this second quake was different, and everyone knew it within seconds. A 6.3 magnitude with an epicenter only 8 miles from the city center, this quake also was much closer to the earth's surface than previous ones. The deadly combination caused an estimated \$25 billion of negative economic impact. Christchurch was declared a National State of Emergency for more than two months. Far worse, 182 lives were lost.

To provide a bit of context, the September quake was scary, but we spent the afternoon at a local pub with our friends watching the news until power was restored in our homes. During the February quake, we were out of town, and when we returned, we carried a positive spirit, ready to get our hands dirty and help rebuild our

community. The first month was a blur of recovery efforts. However, by the end of March, the psychological effects kicked in as the “survival mode” wore off. We began to feel the heaviness of the community.

After the February quake, the media and “everyone” else labeled Cantabrians a people of great resilience. Although most of the city center remained cordoned off to the public and many homes were merely piles of rubble, people were extremely dedicated to rebuilding. There were dozens of visioning and planning conferences for the public. Although many were “low” psychologically — myself included — it was hard not to get excited about the brilliant ideas and strategies for the city's future.

Well, that drastically changed on Monday, June 13, 2011, when Christchurch was hit with a third major quake. The fast-starting and violent 6.3 quake lasted about 30 seconds, during which I couldn't help but hit the ground and cry — not out of fear, but exhaustion, just thinking, “No! This cannot be happening again!” Buildings that were half down from the

February quake came all the way down; streets flooded as the city's underground pipes burst, again; sirens and house and car alarms blared; liquefaction, a muddy substance, boiled out of the ground and into the streets and homes; everywhere children screamed and people cried. My tears were the manifestation of a momentary loss of hope, knowing I was living in a city that was starting its recovery process all over again. This time, though, the community seemed to question whether the quakes would ever stop, and whether people “had it in them” to stick with the rebuild. Within seconds, our hopes seemed gone, leaving us like deflated balloons.

Today, we still have aftershocks daily, some causing public areas to evacuate and businesses to close. We have had to accept the uncertainty of the ground on which this city sits. However, living in a city that is rebuilding does have its perks, as it is a hub for innovation, creativity and education. In the midst of the chaos, Lane and I found greater meaning, as we discovered our role and calling in the healing process.

Stirred into Action

After the initial quake in September 2010, a grassroots student organization was formed — the Student Volunteer Army (SVA). Thousands of students equipped with shovels and wheelbarrows swarmed the worst hit neighborhoods for clean-up. After the February quake, the group was 9,000 strong.

For Lane's Ph.D., he researched a teaching method called service-learning, which connects course curriculum to community engagement through practical experience. The February quake and the work of the SVA, motivated Lane and his colleague, Dr. Billy O'Steen, to design a university course aimed at fostering reflection, healing and greater meaning from these students' experiences through service. In the midst of the earthquake chaos, this project gave Lane direction, purpose and a creative outlet.

Meanwhile, I decided to open “Hotel Perry.” We opened our home to any-



one who needed a place to sleep, eat, shower, do laundry, use the internet, talk, cry or “just be.” Many of our friends’ houses were condemned or did not have power and water for weeks. During the month of March, we had 13 house guests, dozens of visitors and fed an average of eight people each night. My role primarily became that of a listener to people in need. I have always been aware of my need and ability to build meaningful relationships and communities, but this experience not only solidified my purpose in this tragedy, but my greater calling in life.

Where to From Here?

The city is slowly making progress, as each aftershock determines that week’s priorities. Approximately half of the thousand condemned buildings have been cleared, and people are finding their “new normal.” For us, Lane submitted his Ph.D. dissertation last August and had a successful defense in October. The service course he designed landed him a job as an assistant professor in the College of Education here at the University of Canterbury. He is working while I am finishing my Ph.D., projected submission in May. We do not know how much longer we will be living in New Zealand, but we do know that we were and are here for a reason. And I am confident that no matter where we end up, our calling will make a way for us, even in the darkest of situations.

For more information about the Perry’s, their research, or the Christchurch earthquakes, contact April at aprilperry2@gmail.com

