



# EMOTIONAL RESCUE

A DEDICATED LEGION OF VOLUNTEERS HELPS LOCALS COPE WITH TRAGEDY AND LOSS. BY MICHELLE GARRIDO

**W**hen he was 21 years of age, firefighter/paramedic Jeff LaTendresse wasn't exactly prepared for anything beyond the tactical aspects of his job. His training readied him for a methodical, by-the-book approach. So when he was dispatched to an elderly woman's home at 2 a.m., he quickly began a nose-to-toes medical assessment. However, he could find nothing wrong with his delicate patient.

"After about 15 minutes, we figured out she was just lonely over her husband's recent death," Jeff says. "It had been his birthday that day, and she was distraught over her loss."

Jeff and others on his crew remained with their grieving patient for about 30 minutes, holding her hand and offering whatever comfort they could. But a busy city beckoned, and the ambulance crew eventually had to pack it up for the next call. "I really felt uncomfortable," he says. "Our focus is to get back in service, to get back to the city, but it never feels good leaving someone behind when they're upset."

Sophisticated emergency systems exist for battling injuries, illness, death and disaster. But service-minded responders and hospital personnel understand there's an emotional component to emergency response that no amount of tactical experience can handle. They also know they sometimes lack the training—and often the time—to give these people appropriate attention.

"We recognized this void in our system," says Jeff, now 45 and Laguna Beach Fire Department (LBFD) division chief. "We're trained to focus on the physical victims of the medical emergency or trauma. But in the background are the 'secondary victims,' those suffering from the psychological aspects of watching a loved one go through the event. Unfortunately, we can't always take the time to tend to these people, to ask if they're OK or make sure they have a ride to the hospital."

The painful truth is a mere handful of fire and police departments offer in-house support services for secondary victims. Due to budget constraints, some go without. Others bridge the gap with an outside agency such as TIP Inc., or Trauma Intervention Program, a national nonprofit that dispatches highly trained citizen volunteers to traumatic incidents at the request of fire, law enforcement and hospital personnel. The Laguna Beach Fire Department entered into its contract with the organization's Orange County affiliate in July 2006; since that time, TIP volunteers have helped local clients navigate some unfathomable tragedies—unexpected infant deaths and

spousal suicides among them. The Orange County TIP chapter also contracts with several area hospitals, where volunteers help clients handle the stress of crises including car accidents, heart attacks and medical diagnosis.

## Good Intentions

TIP volunteers are available 24-7. At each call, their primary goal is to prevent "secondary injury," the often long-term psychological trauma that occurs when victims or their loved ones don't receive emotional support during and after a tragedy. A mother may eventually accept a child's death, for example, but she may never recover from what she perceives as gruff treatment from the hospital staff, who were too busy treating her child to answer her frantic questions. Those memories can haunt someone for years.

"We call it 'the video tape,'" says Debbie Simpson, a crisis team manager with TIP's Orange County chapter. "When someone goes through the shock of seeing someone die, commit suicide or suffer an injury, sometimes their mind doesn't work properly. They tend to replay the event over and over."

TIP volunteers advocate for their clients, helping them weather

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tumultuous emotional waters so they can regain a sense of control, which is key to moving forward. This advocacy manifests in many ways, ranging from the simple, such as food and water, to the more complex, such as arranging for the client to have a few quiet moments alone with a recently deceased family member. The volunteers offer practical support as well, including lists of local mortuaries if needed and information on crisis counseling. Helping clients manage these overwhelming issues enables emergency responders to focus on their priorities.

"Our professional caregivers deal with so many things," says Bucky Weeks, director of Chaplain Services and Community Relations for South Coast Medical Center in Laguna Beach. "TIP volunteers don't mind supporting in a lot of ways that often go unnoticed. It's a tremendous service to those working on the patient. It frees up their time and helps maintain a calm atmosphere."

"TIP is truly one of the most worthwhile organizations I've ever encountered," says Laguna Beach Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Rose Hancock. "It's the most courageous thing any of us could do, to hold the hand of a stranger in the face of death. TIP volunteers do this on a regular basis, and we are so proud to have them as members of our community."

Laguna Beach presents some unique challenges for TIP; it attracts masses of tourists throughout the year. If tragedy befalls one of them, it's likely they'll have no support to help them through the turmoil. This is one reason the Orange County TIP affiliate is seeking up to seven more volunteers. Volunteering might not suit everyone, however. TIP requires background checks for all potential volunteers, plus 55 hours of training: 40 classroom hours plus 15 hours in the field. It may seem extensive, but the training prepares volunteers for any challenges they might face. "We're very clear about our expectations," Wayne says. "The training is intense, and it helps us maintain high standards. It also helps people screen themselves out, to determine whether this type of volunteering is for them."

Once training is complete, volunteers commit to three 12-hour shifts and one three-hour continuing education meeting each month. Ideal candidates are compassionate, calm and strong. "You need to be able to put aside whatever might be happening in your own life and be willing to focus on someone else during their worst hour," says Mindy LaTendresse, Laguna Beach-based TIP volunteer. "When the call is over, you need to be able to put it behind you and get back to your own life, but you always know you've helped someone the very best you can on their very worst day."

Those interested in volunteering for TIP can register online with its Orange County affiliate. Visit [www.tiporangecounty.org](http://www.tiporangecounty.org). For more information, visit [www.tipnational.org](http://www.tipnational.org).

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Jeff agrees, saying TIP volunteers allow police and firefighters to get back in service sooner. "We can leave with a clear conscience knowing there's someone there to help this person through a difficult time; we're not just packing up our stuff and leaving them by themselves."

### Emotional First Aid

A TIP volunteer's most important role is that of confidante. Well-meaning friends and family sometimes do more harm than good. Having someone, especially a stranger, legitimize their feelings helps many clients begin a healthy grieving process.

"We tell them it's OK to remember, it's OK to talk about their loss," says Laguna Beach resident and TIP volunteer Mindy LaTendresse. Mindy first learned about the TIP program after her husband Jeff won the organization's Heroes with Hearts award five years ago. TIP grants the award to emergency responders who exhibit exemplary compassion while on duty. Mindy began volunteering for TIP in August 2008, and one of her early dispatches was to the home of a family whose 18-month-old baby had drowned in the family pool. When she arrived, the family seemed immobilized by shock.

"It was as if they were holding their breath, and they were waiting for someone to give them air," Mindy says. "They didn't know what to do." Mindy had the father get one of the baby's blankets for the mother to hold. She then sat down and gently encouraged them to talk about their daughter. "I asked them to tell me what happened, to tell me about their baby. They went from high to lows. First they were happy and



BUCKY WEEKS

laughing, and then they were sad and crying. It's our job to stay with them and tell them it's OK to feel what they're feeling."

TIP volunteers agree these intimate interactions with complete strangers are powerful. Having support from a person outside the emotional storm helps people retain a sense of reality. "A gentle touch, a shoulder to lean on. I really didn't do anything for them. I didn't say

anything that they didn't already know," Mindy says. "They had no other support system, and I think my being there helped them make it through the process."

### Caretaker, Caregiver

No one understands how TIP volunteers help clients transcend their dire circumstances better than Yorba Linda resident Debbie Collins. Collins first encountered TIP in 1998, when her 27-year-old niece Sarah was struck by a car traveling at 50 mph. It knocked her 60 feet in the air and severed one leg. No one on scene believed she could survive.

"The only part of her that wasn't injured was her face," Debbie recalls. "Her neck was broken, her spleen was [destroyed]. It was awful. Part of the car went through her. It was very critical."

Compounding the horrific event was the fact that Sarah's friend had contributed to the accident. She was on her way to drive Sarah to work, as she changed lanes to approach the curb where Sarah waited, she hit the car traveling beside her, catapulting it into her friend. Sarah's roommate rushed outside, located her gravely injured friend's address book and began notifying family members.

By the time Debbie arrived at Western

Medical Center in Santa Ana, two TIP volunteers were already in the waiting room. "They were so calm and so comforting," she says. "They were holding onto Sarah's roommate, giving her support and helping everyone stay calm." As other friends and family members arrived, the TIP volunteers helped calm them as well, including the friend involved in the accident.

"We had been there for awhile waiting for Sarah to come out of surgery," says Debbie. "A neurologist came out and told us she wasn't going to live, and if she did survive, she would likely be a quadriplegic." Hearing this gut-wrenching report, Sarah's friend collapsed in hysterics, horrified that she might have killed her friend. The TIP volunteers calmly escorted her to another room where they could comfort her while allowing the family time to support one another.

"They were so kind to us, and they were so kind to her," Debbie says. "She had no family there, and although we were supporting her

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as much as we could, telling her it was an accident, we were with our family and in our own minds. They were angels. I remember thinking, 'What a great organization. If I ever have time, I'm going to give back. I'm going to do this.' ”

Sarah did survive and is now a nurse with three children. Her aunt kept her promise, and in 2002 began volunteering for the organization that gave to her so generously more than 10 years ago. "I love it," says Debbie. "I know it sounds crazy, but I get more out of it than I give. I'll meet a stranger who's having the worst day of their life, and they'll open up. They'll talk to me, they'll hold onto me. When I leave, a lot of times people tell me they couldn't have done it without me." **LB**



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