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Seminar helps citizen helpers assist people in traumatic situations

Seminar prepared students to help persons in traumatic situations

BY CHERYL WALKER

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For four hours Friday afternoon, June 27, 40 Laguna Woods residents attended a unique seminar in Laguna Woods City Hall Council Chambers where they learned the five basic principles of emotional first aid to assist people of all ages on the worst day of their lives: when death, crime, disaster or some other emergency knocks.

"It's their own personal 9/11," explained Wayne Fortin, founder and CEO of Trauma Intervention Program which gave the seminar. "You don't get over tragedy, you get through it."

TIP, a national non-profit organization founded in 1985, trains citizen volunteers to help people in trauma situations at the request of professional emergency responders (police, fire and hospital personnel).

TIP citizen volunteers make themselves available at a moment's notice for three to four 12 hour shifts each month. Citizen helpers, like those trained in the June 27 seminar, will be available as needed to help family, friends, neighbors and strangers. Fortin called it delivering the equivalent of emotional first aid with a degree of confidence.

After a discussion of each point, Fortin and TIP Citizen Volunteer and National Trainer Heather Sergeant of Laguna Woods demonstrated it in action with a little skit.

Fortin explained he started TIP to respond to the other victims, the forgotten ones, in a trauma situation. Not the one injured being worked on by emergency personnel, but the people around them as well as the family and friends who arrive on the scene.

He said the citizen helper's support of the other victims of a disaster can save that individual from years of flashback trauma.

He said most untrained people say all the wrong things and actually make the situation worse instead of better.

And the first 24 hours after a tragedy are key to preventing what he termed the second injury after the initial loss.

Sergeant explained the five skills are not done in any particular order and include: reaching out, protecting, reassuring, organizing and reinforcing.

Reaching out can be as simple as a gentle touch. And when words are used they should be calm to express care for the individual rather than try to cure the situation. "When in doubt, be silent, a caring presence beside the person."

Fortin said the helper shouldn't try to minimize the situation, but allow the victim to talk and be a good listener. Both emphasized the need to protect the forgotten victim from people who want to take advantage of the situation and even from themselves, since they are not thinking clearly. "Be in tune with the person you are with." Also the helper should check if the victim has taken their medicine or needs to take medication.

The second victim also needs information and the helper can serve as a liaison to bring the professionals to explain what's going on.

And sooner or later the second victim will also need a plan to move forward. The helper must allow the victim to reminisce and also be on the alert for what they instinctively are seeking to allow them to find a comfort zone: religious sentiments, a pet or something that comes out in the midst of the trauma.

Sergeant noted that with one woman it was a lock of her late husband's hair, with an elderly man it was a final look at his late wife's face as she lay on the ground after being hit in a fatal car accident and with still another it was the touch of her late husband's hand after he committed suicide.



Wayne Fortin, founder and CEO of TIP, the trauma prevention program, and National TIP instructor and Laguna Woods resident, gave a four hour seminar on emotional first aid for trauma victims June 27 in Laguna Woods City Hall. TIP volunteers are called in by professional emergency responders to assist the second victims of a disaster: the friends, family, loved ones and bystanders impacted in a crisis.

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Both Fortin and Sergeant cautioned against saying platitudes or trying to take control of the situation since it is eventually the forgotten victim who must take charge to move forward.

Sergeant said letters from those helped by emotional first aid point out the value of the work. "Sometimes you come back from a call and feel like you've done nothing, and then we'll get a letter thanking us for what we did. It's very rewarding."

Attendees of the seminar were universal in their praise of the program and the information presented, some even expressed an interest in going on to become a full fledged TIP volunteer when training takes place later this summer.

TIP has 15 affiliates serving over 250 cities across the nation and has received the Innovations Award in State and Local government from Harvard University and Ford Foundation, Crime Victim Service Award from the US Justice Department and the Governor's Victim Service Award from the State of California. Training classes to become a credentialed TIP citizen volunteer to help professional emergency responders will be held July 31 to Aug. 12 at the Orange County Fire Authority Training facility. Car pools can be arranged. Students can sign up by calling 714-314-0744, by emailing TIPIncCeo@aol.com or by going online to the tip website:

www.TIPOrangeCounty.org/volunteerregistration.htm.

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