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Counselors Without Borders team uses culturally sensitive strategies to reach out to American Indian and migrant communities in wake of California wildfires

By Jonathan Rollins

As wildfires scorched Southern California in October and November 2007, the prevailing images that emerged from the news coverage were of the million-dollar homes, many perched precariously, yet grandly, on hillsides, seemingly standing sentry as the flames advanced to consume them. As these real-life dramas played out on national television, other communities were also battling to save their families, their homes and their land, but largely absent the media coverage.

"There are no words, no pictures, no video that can describe — that can honor — what we saw. Many of the things we saw weren't covered by the news, so there was this sense of being isolated," says Diana Ortiz, who will be graduating with her master's degree in counseling and human development from George Mason University (GMU) in Fairfax, Va., in May. Ortiz was one of 16 graduate counseling students — eight apiece from GMU and San Diego State University (SDSU) — recruited to be members of a Counselors Without Borders team that mobilized to help underserved communities in San Diego County in the wake of the wildfires.

The team, led and supervised by American Counseling Association members Fred Bemak and Rita Chi-Ying Chung of GMU and Carol Robinson-Zafartu and Juan Camarena of SDSU, focused on providing culturally responsive counseling, mainly in migrant communities and on American Indian reservations, seeing approximately 1,220 individuals in a week's time. Bemak, who initiated the trip, established Counselors Without Borders as a pilot project for supervised graduate students to provide culturally sensitive counseling. A Counselors Without Borders team previously deployed to Mississippi to provide services to those affected by Hurricane Katrina (see "Counselors without borders," January 2006).

That trip to Mississippi, says Chung, led to the creation of a culturally sensitive disaster response model that was used to train the students for their experience in California. Students were hand-selected for the team based not only on their overall counseling skill, but also on their multicultural awareness and, in many instances, their ability to speak other languages, Chung explains. The team included American Indian students, as well as students who spoke Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Vietnamese.

Because the team had to be pulled together so quickly, much of the training took place on-site and, in the case of GMU's students, shortly before departing for California. But Tora Henry, a GMU student who will graduate in May, says her master's counseling classes also prepared her for the experience in California by emphasizing diversity and cultural sensitivity. "I think those classes helped even more than the disaster training we received," she says. "Initially, I was very nervous (about participating on the team), but I realized it would be valuable to work with such diverse populations at such a sensitive time. And it was also just a great opportunity to help."

After arriving, the students went through a full-day orientation, which included driving around the fire-ravaged area simply to observe the devastation. "That was hard and difficult, because it almost felt like intruding," Henry says, "but I knew how necessary it was. I knew it was necessary to see houses missing from between other houses."

Missing from the map?

In some cases, the counseling students and their supervisors drove for hours to reach the communities in which they served. Robinson-Zañartu, chair of the SDSU Department of Counseling and School Psychology, explains that San Diego County, where eight separate wildfires started between Oct. 21 and Oct. 24, is roughly the size of Connecticut. And while the county includes the large city of San Diego, it is also home to 18 American Indian reservations, all very rural in nature.

“(On television), people only saw the fairly well-to-do areas where people lost homes,” Robinson-Zañartu says. “One of the things we heard that was striking was one man who asked, ‘Are we not on the map?’ because no one came to his community to help after the fires.”

“We were driving to some of these underserved areas, and there was no sign of (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) or the American Red Cross,” Chung confirms. “It was heart-breaking.” There were also reports of some organizations and localities turning away migrant workers for services because they could not produce documentation. “You can imagine the migrant communities not feeling welcome at all,” Chung says.

In still other lower-income areas, the American Red Cross and other agencies attempted to provide services, but community members often regarded these organizations with suspicion, according to the counselor educators. “In the migrant communities in particular, there was a tremendous amount of distrust and fear, so they wouldn’t come for services,” Robinson-Zañartu reports. “One woman said she wasn’t going to leave her house because she knew the Border Patrol was waiting, and she said she would rather burn. We often encountered this combination of fear and trauma feeding each other.”

The Counselors Without Borders team used two strategies in particular that provided greater access to those needing help. “Our approach was to go to venues that were ‘safe’ to clients and to enter respectfully,” Robinson-Zañartu says. “Ethnic communities frequently have cultural norms for being welcomed. For instance, we met with the tribal council at Pauma Reservation and the tribal chair and vice chair at La Jolla (both Luiseño Indian reservations) to ask permission to enter the communities before working there. They were appreciative and welcoming. In migrant communities, entry was via other known and trusted people, such as teachers and mentors in the community, who introduced us. This made it safer for the community members to be open with us.”

And instead of setting up a tent or table and waiting for individuals to line up for services, as many other relief organizations did, the Counselors Without Borders team took a more proactive approach. On the reservations, team members walked from house to house, which were often separated by great distances, simply checking on people and offering them water. “As scary as it was to walk around and knock on doors instead of sitting in a tent and waiting for people to come for assistance, you simply remembered why you were doing it,” Henry says. “They would sometimes say, ‘You didn’t forget about me. The world didn’t forget.’”

A similar approach was used in migrant communities. “With migrant parents, we might go to their homes and help them cook,” Chung explains. “Some of them would then take us to a friend’s or neighbor’s house who needed help. So what we were doing spread by word of mouth.”

Chung believes it was important for the team first to check on the community members’ basic needs, which created a certain level of trust, before jumping into issues of mental health. When the time did come to focus on counseling, the Counselors Without Borders team used the term stress support to describe the services being offered. “When you use the term crisis or mental health counseling, the reaction might be, ‘What do you mean? That I’m crazy?’” Chung explains. “But stress is something where there is no stigma. We use terms that the community can understand and that are nonthreatening. We’re trying to normalize their experience and let them know, ‘You’re not the only one. You’re not by yourself.’”

While the Counselors Without Borders approach to disaster mental health is different than that used by the American Red Cross, Chung says that should not be interpreted as a criticism. “We weren’t there to undermine the American Red Cross,” she emphasizes. “We wanted to be there in conjunction, in addition to the American Red Cross. Counselors Without Borders is not a turf issue. That’s just where our expertise is — working with low-income, disenfranchised communities. There is nothing worse than seeing organizations coming into a disaster area and fighting. We just want to help those communities that are not being reached.”

When not to be a counselor

Henry spent much of her time on the reservations working with middle and high school students, including three days at the All Tribes Indian Charter School. Some of the students had lost homes in the fires, while others had extended family members living with them because their relatives' homes had been destroyed. The students were very concerned that a wildfire might claim their school as well. Many of the students had been kicked out of other schools, Henry explains, and the All Tribes Indian Charter School represented the one place where they still felt accepted and understood.

The student community was small, tight-knit and very reluctant to talk to "outsiders" such as Henry. "Initially, the experience was very intense because their walls were up," she says. "We had to tell them, 'We're not here for any hidden agendas.'"

Henry admits she also had to change her mind-set before she could effectively connect with the students and get them to open up. "Initially, I was going in as a counselor — 'I'm here to help you with your issues,'" she says. "I learned that I had to become an advocate for them and not focus so much on the counselor/client relationship. I learned that I couldn't be a 'sterile' counselor in this situation."

For instance, the students wanted to know more about Henry, who is African American, and what it was like for her to be on the reservation. "Once I decided not to be a counselor and just to build a rapport with them, things changed for the better," she says. "Playing football with them and giving them high-fives seemed to give them room to breathe and confidence to speak to me more openly." Henry also played Hangman with the students and discovered the words they chose for the game provided insights into their lives. She used that as a springboard to get the students to elaborate on some of the issues they were facing. After eight hours together, a bond of trust had formed. No longer were the students asking "Who are you?" and "What do you want?" but rather "Will you come back tomorrow?"

"Initial rapport-building was very soft and very respectful — almost social to begin with — in our Spanish-speaking and Native communities," Robinson-Zafartu says. "Lots of trust-building needs to occur before working with deeper issues, lots of listening before entering into discussions about the traumas."

In turn, she says, helping clients deal with current traumatic events can open up doors to past unresolved issues when counselors are attentive. Robinson-Zafartu recalls visiting one reservation almost completely destroyed by the wildfires. "The whole community felt the impact, and the surrounding reservations felt it too. One woman said to us, 'We live with trauma all the time. This is who we are as a community.' That's an example of how one trauma might bring up another. It's an opportunity to begin having conversations about those longer term needs."

Listening, not saving lives

The bulk of Ortiz's experience took place in Head Start programs and public schools in migrant communities, where she worked with parents, students and staff members. It was the students' first week back in school since the wildfires, and Ortiz found that the teachers, many of whom had also been directly impacted, wanted to return to a normal routine immediately instead of talking about the disaster with the children. "Sadly, for some of the students, the school didn't even know they had lost their homes," Ortiz says. "There was a lot of mistrust."

That situation also bothered Robinson-Zafartu, who expresses concern that schools don't understand the wide-ranging effects of trauma and often believe services are only necessary for children who have lost a home or loved one. "It's sad to think a lot of schools were saying, 'Oh, no, they're fine. They're in class.' ... Schools and other institutions need more information about the need to debrief from traumatic incidents in order to support restoring normalcy."

Counselors Without Borders team members offered a significant amount of group counseling in the schools, Ortiz says, because that approach provided a "safe" setting and let participants know they were not alone in their experience. "We wanted to offer space where people knew someone would just listen," she says. "That was very impactful and profound, just to sit and listen to how they were doing. We were not there to save their lives or change their world. We were there to hear their stories and strengthen and focus their connections." Ortiz, originally from Colombia, says it was also helpful that she and some of the other student counselors spoke Spanish, which allowed many of the children and parents to communicate in their native language. "Even if you're not from the same country, language is a plus, especially if you're talking about feeling," she says. "Expressing it in your own language makes a big difference."

Even so, many children still found the right words for expressing the enormity of their situation hard to come by. In those instances, the counselors used another tactic. "We did a lot of

drawing and art with the children, but nothing structured, no checklists," Ortiz says. "Children were great with drawings. If they could not express what they were feeling in words, they could do it this way."

Similarly, team members working with the Head Start programs sometimes sat in the sandboxes and played with the children. As the kids began drawing pictures in the sand, Robinson-Zañartu says, "We would ask, 'What does this remind you of?' It was a real low-key way to establish rapport." The counselors would engage parents and staff members by talking with them on the playground benches.

Debriefing sessions, held each evening, played a critical role for the graduate students on the Counselors Without Borders team. "We saw a huge number of people while we were there," Ortiz says. "Listening to all these stories that were so fully charged with all these emotions, it was really important that we were regularly checking in with someone else. It was important to let it all out — all the challenges we were facing. It helps to know that someone is supporting you and backing you up."

The debriefing sessions served not only as a time to receive feedback from the supervisors, but also to review personal biases, Henry adds. "The debriefing each night was very powerful," she says. "We were facing a lot of fears each day, and in debriefing, we discussed how to overcome those fears so we could be present. I think I cried every night, but then I wiped those tears and got right back into it."

Heading home

While the Counselors Without Borders team was successful in reaching out to communities that may have otherwise gone overlooked, Chung says it was equally important to ensure that these communities had access to counseling resources after the team left. The counselors handed out a large amount of Spanish-language literature in migrant communities detailing where people could turn for long-term support.

Still, the prospect of leaving proved difficult for many team members. When a GMU student counselor went to an elementary school to say goodbye, two young girls whom she had helped clung to her desperately and cried. Chung told the student counselor that she needed to perform some type of closure exercise with the girls.

The counselor was the only person one of the little girls had told about her dog dying in the fires. So the counselor asked the child to draw a picture of her dog. They then cut the dog out, walked around the school to a spot the girl regarded as special and "buried" the picture of the dog near a swing and tree. "If you come back and the dog's not here, it's probably moved on," the counselor told the girl, "but you can always think of this spot and the special times we had."

The counselor then sat with the other girl and, as they drew another picture, talked about what this experience had meant to both of them. As they continued talking, the counselor started developing a new support system for the girl, calling other children over and asking if they could relate to what she was feeling. The others started talking about their own experiences with the wildfires, helping the little girl realize she wouldn't be alone after the counselor left. Before long, the girl exchanged drawings with the counselor and quickly ran off to play with her new friends.

"Through this experience in California, I think the students learned the degree of respect you have to have for the clients and their communities," Chung says. "You don't feel sorry for them. You step back and look at your own issues and really think about the needs of your clients."

Henry agrees. "Looking back, I don't think (the people we met) needed our strength. They just needed us to be right there with them. ... This experience has changed my outlook. My approach to counseling will definitely allow for diversity and the ability to work with all populations. It opened up a whole world that I had really shut off or wasn't aware of."

Ortiz says she previously possessed a passion for multicultural issues and working with diverse populations but believes this experience served to strengthen her resolve. "There is a big need to provide culturally appropriate and sensitive services," she says. "Many people who need help don't trust. They are afraid. They live in a fearful environment, not only in California, but sadly, in many other places. This experience is something I will keep with me forever. It really impacted me and gives me even more reasons to do better and to work harder."

"People can learn a lot about other people's cultures, histories and ecosystems," Robinson-Zañartu says. "If you really allow yourself to understand that whole system as well as culturally based traumas, you don't have to be a person of color to be really helpful."

Chung hopes the Counselors Without Borders model will inspire other counselor education programs to develop similar projects. "It's one thing to have classroom learning. It's another thing to be out in the field, and the demand is there," she says.

"I also hope this will inspire counselors-in-training and professional counselors to volunteer for future disaster response work. Furthermore, I hope counselor training programs will have courses on disaster training, because it is not a matter of if disasters will happen, but, unfortunately, when. We need to train our future counselors to be disaster-ready counselors."

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