

S. Tahoe grad near epicenter of New Zealand temblor

Updated Feb. 25, 2011, 11:30am.

Publisher's note: *Hillary Santana, the 2008 salutatorian at South Tahoe High School who works for the Lake Tahoe Basin Forest Service office in the summer, is an exchange student in New Zealand from her university in Pennsylvania. The following is from her dad. Hillary is the daughter of David and Bernadette Santana, who work at STHS.*

By David Santana

When South Tahoe High School graduate Hillary Santana elected to pursue her Environmental Studies concentration abroad, she had no idea how immediate and impactful her education would soon be. The Swarthmore College junior arrived in Christchurch, New Zealand, to attend classes at the University of Canterbury just more than a week ago.

Before then, her only brush with adversity had been a half-day's wait on a delayed arrival of luggage from the North Island's Auckland airport. After spending a week acclimating to her new environs and enrolling in classes, Hillary witnessed what could only be described as a life-changing experience as she sat in a lecture hall on the Canterbury campus.



Hillary

Santana

Shortly before 1pm on Feb. 22, as the class listened to a speaker, the building began to shudder and roll, and students and staff scrambled for the shelter of desks and doorways as a reported 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck just more than 2 miles below the New Zealand city.

In an emergency phone conversation with home shortly afterward on a dedicated line, Hillary described the experience: "Dad, it was crazy – I've never been so scared in my life. As soon as the shaking stopped, we got the heck outta there, and out onto the lawn!"

The University of Canterbury campus, located only 3 miles from the quake's epicenter, was quickly evacuated as many of the older buildings had to be secured and inspected. No major damage was immediately found there, but downtown Christchurch, only 3 miles away, was not so fortunate.

To date, there have been 65 confirmed deaths, and hundreds of people missing as rescue crews scour several devastated buildings for survivors. Water and power have been shut down in much of the area, as damage to drinking water, sewage, and gas and electric systems have been reported. The night following the disaster has been a long and wet one for many of the evacuees, as rain began falling on hundreds of individuals preferring to spend the night outdoors as aftershocks riddled the area

"They finally let us back into our dorms this evening, but my flat's on the fourth floor, and I'm not too sleepy, if you know what I mean."

Describing her flatmates as "pretty freaked out", Hillary has been trying to keep updated on the chaos downtown.

"It's not good, Dad. Several of us are looking to volunteer at the shelters they're setting up outside of the areas of

devastation for the evacuees," she said. Classes at Canterbury have been canceled for the week, pending any further developments.

"It looks like we'll have lots of time on our hands to help out," she said.

Although Internet and phone service have been limited in the hours following the earthquake, people wishing to help out and stay informed may contact the New Zealand Red Cross.

Here is an update, day two:

"Dad, there's no water, and we're still feeling aftershocks every half hour or so. I still can't believe how bad things are in downtown. It's only a 15-minute bus ride away."

Hillary has been able to communicate with family by phone, but Internet service is still down at her location near the University of Canterbury campus. As to the moment the quake struck, she states: "I had been packing my things to leave class, and the room started shaking violently. It felt pretty unreal, and I literally asked myself if it was really an earthquake. It felt as if the building was no longer attached to the ground. Most of us ducked under desks, and covered our heads. When it stopped, we were told to move outside and away from any buildings – no problem there! A large aftershock occurred soon after, and it was very strange to see concrete shake."

Back at her apartment dorms an hour later, emergency personnel were still limiting access until inspections were completed.

"The building next to mine suffered a crack, so the people living there had to stay in another flat. At that point, we still had no power or water, and phone service was still spotty. I was still nervous and confused, but I really had no idea then how bad things were a couple of miles away.

“Little information has been passed along yet as to how locals can volunteer, and emergency efforts have restricted travel. I will continue to keep everyone updated as best I can, and I hope everyone out there is thinking hopeful thoughts for the city and its people, as I am. I’m fortunate to be in a relatively safe place, and this city has been very welcoming to me since I arrived here only 10 days ago. I hope things will turn up, and that people who are still missing will be found and returned to their loved ones.”

Day 3

“So, the aftershocks are becoming almost commonplace by now ... it’s not easy to sleep, but you just kinda look around and ride them out.

“Water at the apartments is still out, and we’re being asked not to flush toilets, as the sewage system is badly damaged down the line – not too pleasant” Hillary is entering Day 3 after the devastating Christchurch quake, and reality is settling in as clean-up and rescue efforts go into overdrive downtown, a few miles away. The official death count has risen to 75, and numbers are expected to rise sharply as downtown buildings are excavated, and hundreds are still trapped. The Christchurch Airport has re-opened for domestic flights, and is limited international flights for transport and rescue craft. Some airlines are offering reduced fares for tourists and international students who wish to leave the area.

“Some of my international classmates have left for Auckland (North Island) or Australia, but once we got our power back, I saw some of the video from downtown ... I mean, the devastation is only a few miles away from the campus, and it’s awful ... I decided I couldn’t go.”

Hillary will be joining approximately 300 other University of Canterbury students who call themselves the Student Volunteer Army. They will be busing into adjoining neighborhoods to help

with clean-up efforts. "Downtown's pretty much cordoned off and limited to army, rescue and police personnel, but surrounding neighborhoods are in need of help," she said. "We'll be leaving in a little bit, so I've gotta go – I'll let you know where we are when we get there – I love you."

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key has declared Christchurch a national disaster, the country's deadliest in more than 80 years. Besides the destruction of several downtown high-rises, water and sewage systems have been badly damaged by the liquefaction of the ground beneath the city in several places, and hundreds, possibly thousands, have been displaced. International rescue teams continue to arrive in Christchurch, and President Obama has pledged American support for the beleaguered city.

"I was taking pictures of the Christchurch Cathedral just last Friday, and cruising the downtown square with my classmates – the news clips are just surreal, Dad." Hillary will be staying on in Christchurch to help with cleanup efforts, and urges her classmates and South Lake Tahoe residents to do the same.

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Day 4

"Up early today to join with other University of Canterbury students (Student Volunteer Army) in clean-up efforts.

"Downtown is heavily cordoned off as search and rescue in the demolished buildings continues. Death toll has risen to 113, and still hundreds unaccounted for. We headed to the coastal communities out by New Brighton Beach in buses. The earth movement has shifted the substrata, pushing up lots and lots of sand and muck into neighborhoods, and clogging drainages. We were assigned to a residence of elderly folks in their 70s and 80s, where we spent the day digging and wheel-barrowing

their yards, garages, and nearby gutters. Their neighbors' house had a large crack running down the center of their floor. We grabbed our shovels and dug in. It was hard work, but the people were exceedingly grateful and fed us what lunch they were able to put together. Being down by the coast, all I could think of was tsunami activity, as the aftershocks have only now begun to subside. I thought about my sister, Victoria, who was in the Navy aboard the USS Duluth during tsunami relief efforts after the disasters in Thailand and Sri Lanka in 2004. It was their job to provide fresh water for the locals, as their ship had water desalination systems on board. Back at the dorm, we've still had to boil our water before using it to drink and cook, but in many areas here people are still getting their water from tanker trucks. When we got back to our apartments, we were tired and sore, but happy to find out that we were finally allowed to take short showers. After today's work, we would've been pretty nasty without them. What's more, we were allowed to flush the toilets – Happy Day!

“Later in the evening, our internet service came on, and as I contacted my folks and friends back home, I realized just how much we take for granted not only basic services like water, sewage and power, but the niceties of the tech age. Just a week ago, I remember complaining to my dad that we had to pay additionally for Internet access at the dorms, while back at Swarthmore we enjoyed campuswide Wi-Fi for free. What a reality check ...

“Classes are still suspended at University of Canterbury, and it appears they will be for another week, at least, while things are put back in order, and buildings checked. I was counting on the three-week break between terms to do some traveling around New Zealand and possibly Australia, but adjustments to the schedule might impact that. For now, we're all following the progress downtown, limiting our water use, and helping when we can.

“I strongly urge people to help, if they can, as the situation

only a few miles away has become truly
heartbreaking.www.redcross.org.nz/donations.”