



Fernandez stands amid the chaos at the Prunedale Safeway.

UPI Photo

# Safeway clerk made the call: Give everything to the needy

PRUNEDALE (UPI) — Rich Fernandez, a burly clerk whose arms strain the seams of supermarket uniform, rummages through a sea of bruised asparagus cans.

"Toss this. Keep this. Toss this," he gruffs at an assistant, who drops appropriately segregated goods into an assortment of pushcarts.

Checking inventory in the backroom of a Safeway supermarket is the sort of work Fernandez is paid to do. He's a food counter, a bottom-of-the-heap job.

But when Tuesday's great quake hit this bedroom community of 7,000, 30 miles south of Santa Cruz, Fernandez, rose to the top. For 48 hours he became a supermarket czar, credited with saving the property and peace of hundreds of community residents.

"We had thousands of people without power and water," said Fernandez, 52. "The migrant workers refused to go back into their homes. There were many homeless, a lot of panic. Babies needed diapers. Refrigerators were dead and food was spoiling."

On his own initiative — phones and roads were down, his boss was isolated in distant San Jose — Fernandez threw open the doors of the store. Six hours after the quake, he began handing out foodstuffs, bottled water, ice, diapers, batteries, flashlights and candles — no charge — to all comers in legitimate need.

Coffee was issued to bus drivers shuttling new homeless from Santa Cruz and packages of rice were distributed in the migrant

camp. He and other workers put in 15- and 20-hour days.

"Everybody who came to the front door I gave two candles or two batteries or a flashlight, enough to get a light in their home," he said.

"Word got around quickly. I don't know how. There was no radio or TV. But the people came, at least 500 in the first few hours. Anybody who asked for it got water. We gave away all our ice quickly. If people looked hungry I would give them a deli sandwich."

There were only a few idiots, he said.

"We had one guy come back for a second set of batteries so he could plug in his walkman. I told him he'd have to do it from a sitting position, because I'd knock him on his ... People cheered."

The biggest problem was power. Fernandez didn't have time to go through channels. There were no channels and food was spoiling. He hired a local electrician to rig a way to keep the store's big freezers alive. The system, which used a string of gas-powered generators, worked.

The system stayed in operation two days until the Health Department threatened to close the store. An hour before the shutdown deadline, regular power was restored. The supermarket in Prunedale, vortex of some of

the quake's greatest devastation, never went out of business.

Safeway's corporate hierarchy still don't know what to make of Fernandez's actions. He was, after all, a clerk. And valuable inventory was given away.

"We don't want to have people think that we give away free food as a matter of policy," said store manager Rick Murphy. "We're still evaluating this."

Fernandez knows his job is still on the line.

"I told people I could lose my work, but I had to do it. You may fault me on my decisions, but you can't fault me for not making them."

Customers have responded.

"We feel we owe Rich a debt," said Beatrice Loudon, piling up luncheon meats at the deli counter. "He didn't have to do what he did. He stuck his neck out."

Fernandez still hasn't figured out how much was given away, perhaps thousands of dollars worth. He's counting the losses now.

But he figures the giveaway was cheap, considering the returns.

"A newspaper ad costs a lot, \$8,000 for four ads. We made a lot more friends with a few dozen boxes of free diapers."



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