

Familia Center:

from community center to disaster headquarters



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Marcella Bautista of Beach Flats surveys the damage in her neighborhood.





Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Familia Center staff Bertha Ceideburg, second from left, Silvia Carballo, center, and Lucy Trujillo, right, helped Beach Flats residents with food, and shelter after quake.

By DENISE FRANKLIN
Sentinel staff writer

THE MAINLY Hispanic, impoverished neighborhood of Beach Flats is located in the area of Santa Cruz most devastated by the Oct. 17, 6.9 earthquake — the shakey flood plain of the San Lorenzo River.

Red tags, marking buildings as uninhabitable, dot the area from south of Laurel Street to the ocean. Five buildings in Beach Flat fly the red tags.

When the quake hit, frightened Beach Flats citizens rushed to the only place they felt secure to go for help — Familia Center on Raymond Street. After the 15 seconds of shaking, Familia Center was transformed from a community center offering English classes, Folklorico dance lessons and medical aid to an emergency relief site.

It was ill prepared for the disaster, admitted center director Lucy Trujillo.

"Today, we are going to reassess everything," said a weary Trujillo Monday. "It was a real learning experience. We were unprepared. No one had a flash light, batteries, portable radio, water. It is important (for us to be prepared) because people here are going to depend on us."



Pre-earthquake scene at Familia Center.

After the quake, the four-member staff of the non-profit center — Trujillo, Bertha Ceideburg, Mary Riotutar and Silvia Carballo — left for their homes to check the damage. By Thursday, the staff was on duty, serving the needs of Beach Flats, but in different ways than it ever had before.

Two days after the quake, the approximately 2,000 people who live in the few square blocks near the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk still didn't have gas or water. Food and shelter were the primary needs, said Trujillo.

"None of us had much gas in our cars. We tried to get a pickup truck, but people were in the same situation with no gas. Linda Quale, a friend of Familia Center, donated her pickup and we went to the Salvation Army to get food," Trujillo related.

The scene at Salvation Army on Laurel Street was hectic, to say the least, she continued. Workers there wanted individuals to come for food, but Trujillo explained to them that if everyone from Beach Flats who needed food came, it would just add to the chaos.

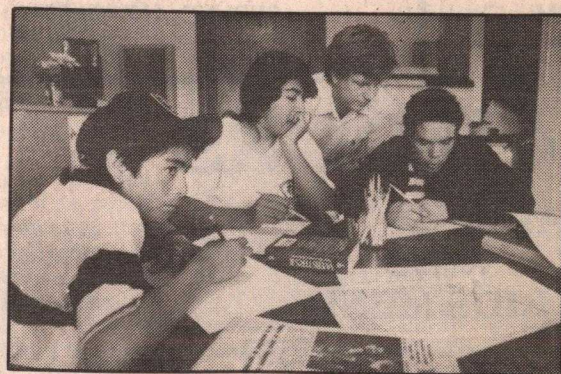
So, they loaded their truck and made their way back to Beach Flats, about a mile away.

THAT FIRST day of operation, they handed out food and water to about 200 residents, said Trujillo.

Many feared going back into their homes. Rental units at the Dolphin Motel and another group of rentals, both on Liebrandt Street, had been closed by red tags, leaving residents to find shelter.

"They had spent the nights their cars, in the two little parks here or in the vacant lot next door ...," said Trujillo. "Some had gone to the Civic Auditorium, but people were concerned because there were a lot of street people there and they didn't want to return."

So, the staff of Familia Center, accustomed to finding its way through bureaucratic red tape on behalf of non-English speaking residents, began looking for shelter.



Photos by Dan Coyro

Paul Mitchell, second from right, tutors, from left, Jesus Martinez, Jorge Cuvilla and Alfredo Silva.

"There were a lot of phone calls and commotion on Friday," Trujillo recalled. "We were still referring people to the Civic Auditorium. It was hard getting anyone on the phone.

"People would just come in, expressing their fears. They needed to talk and they were concerned for their children. After the first night, some of the children had temperatures from sleeping outside."

By sheer luck, the staff got a phone number for the U.S. Navy, got through on the congested phone lines, and lined up two large tents for Saturday night.

THINGS WERE looking up. Food and water arrived Friday and Saturday from the Red Cross, citizen donations and church groups. The Seaside Company, owner of the nearby Beach Boardwalk and of the vacant lot next to Familia Center, gave permission to set up the tents in the lot.

The tents arrived at 10:30 Friday night. Familia Center staffers stayed on until 1:30 a.m. Saturday, when the tents were finally raised. Citizens volunteered to put up the tents; among them were those who make their living selling drugs on Beach Flat streets, said Trujillo.

This caused some problems.

The area's drug dealers and drug users wanted to stay in the tents Saturday night. With confrontation threatening, Familia Center staff stood firm in refusing. The shelter was for women and children only, they said.

Eventually, the drug dealers and users backed off. That night, about 50 women and children filled the tents.

The dealers and the users weren't the only angry people the staff had to contend with, said Trujillo. Some city officials, discovering Familia Center had secured tents, got upset because of the city's camping ban.

"City officials grew upset because we didn't go through the right channels, but we couldn't reach anyone," said a frustrated Trujillo. "It was by chance that we got through to the Navy."

The city, according to public information spokesman Ann-Marie Mitroff, frowns on quake victims staying in tents "because we have plenty of places for people to stay — under a roof instead of in a cold tent. In tents, there could be problems with fires, the cold could cause health problems."

By Saturday night, few people were occupying the temporary "tent city." PG&E had restored power and gas to the neighborhood.

Trujillo believes Familia Center truly showed during the past week that it serves as a *community center*.

THAT IS the goal of the center, to serve the entire Beach Flats community — Hispanic and non-Hispanic alike, said Trujillo.

The center receives funds from the Greater Community Foundation, Community Action Board, private donations, and the city of Santa Cruz.

"Our title is half Spanish, half English because we are bicultural and bilingual. We're here to serve not just the Hispanic population. We get more

phone calls from members of the English-speaking population who want information and can't get it anywhere else," Trujillo said.

But the fact is, Familia Center is there mainly for the Mexican-American population that surrounds it. Of the approximately 2,000 people in Beach Flats, 79 percent are Hispanic. In the first six months of this year, 1,836 people used the center — 96.8 percent were Hispanic.

This irritates some Beach Flats residents, particularly Philip Baer, who operates a nearby rental complex on Uhden Street. Earlier this year, Baer complained to the city about a basketball hoop that the city allowed erected in the park next to the center. The hoop, he said, would attract drug dealers and users to the park. The city let the hoop stand.

Baer also contends those who run the center are supportive of a low-income housing project proposed for Beach Flats — something he opposes.

Anglos in the area don't feel welcome at the center, he claimed, nor at the Fenix Youth Center drug prevention program, nor at the after-school recreation run by the city. Even after the quake, he added, Beach Flat Anglos didn't take the center's welcome mat seriously.

"I heard complaints from Anglos that the effort was being geared toward Latinos and that they were being shoved out of line. But we didn't go there, so I can't comment on that directly. I don't think any of the local Anglos went there at all. It is thought of an Hispanic thing."

IT'S TRUE that few white faces are seen at 302 Raymond St., which houses Familia Center, the Fenix Youth Center and Kid's Club, a city-sponsored, after-school recreation program.

Middle-aged Hispanic men come for the English classes taught by Clara Welch, one of the few Anglos faces seen around the center. Spanish-speaking mothers and children show up for the once-a-week medical clinic run by a doctor or physician's assistant.

Hispanic women use the center to get help as victims of domestic violence. Center staff members and volunteers have been trained to deal with these situations.

In the afternoons, the center fills with the sounds and activities of young Hispanics. Teen-age boys, fighting off the temptations to use drugs, congregate at the Fenix Youth Center. Younger kids dance to the instruction of Folklorico teacher Soledad Vega, or grab bats and balls for after-school recreation. Other teens work on homework and on a Beach Flats newsletter with volunteer Paul Mitchell.

Trujillo believes the pro-Hispanic, anti-Anglo image Baer gives the center is undeserved. When the Food Bank operated there a couple years ago, many Anglo seniors came. And when Familia Center used to give emergency food referrals, most were given to Anglos, she said.

"I know that the people who don't agree try to imply that it is only for Hispanics," said Trujillo. "That is not so. Anglo people can go directly to the other resources without a need for advocacy. If everything could be done in English and Spanish at the other agencies, there really wouldn't be a need for Familia Center."