

CSUN implements new safety measures after 1994 quake

Christian Patterson, California State-Northridge Sundial, 2-1-11

The magnitude 6.7 earthquake that shook Northridge at 4:31 a.m. on Jan. 17, 1994 caused \$400 million in damages. All buildings were damaged, including the Oviatt Library, which suffered damage to both wings and a partial collapse of the roof.

Since the quake, the university has mandated that the campus and its individual colleges have an Emergency Action Plan in the event that another earthquake strikes the Valley. Each college has staff and faculty appointed for duties such as crisis-management, roll-call, meeting locations and clearing buildings.

“Having an Emergency Action Plan for each college is an ongoing, living, breathing process,” said Kit Espinosa, Emergency Preparedness coordinator for CSUN.

Espinosa coordinates safety campaigns for students on campus, creates reference guides, trains dormitory resident advisors and outlines essential items that should be in every emergency kit.

“In the event of a disaster, 95 percent of people are going to be helping each other. If you’re not prepared, you can’t help others,” Espinosa said.

Bettina Huber, director of institutional research on campus said enrollment at CSUN for the post- quake semester did not change dramatically compared to the previous one. When the quake hit, there were 27,282 students attending. By the Fall 1994, enrollment dropped by 11 percent. It did not return to its original level until 1996.

Despite being shaken and a bit uneasy by what happened, most students did their best to return to a semi-normal school schedule. One such student was Pamela Smith, a history major who transferred to CSUN from New York University.

“I did not disenroll after the quake. I spent so much time trying to get in. I was an adult and excited to get my bachelors,” Smith said.

Smith waited two weeks until the back roads and freeway were safe enough for travel to campus.

“The campus looked like tent city but CSUN did a good job assembling considering what had happened,” Smith said.

Because resources were limited, faculty members had to adjust to older equipment for teaching as well as crowded and confined spaces in tents or trailers. Most faculty members were not allowed into their offices due to damage inflicted on the buildings.

“The temporary trailers were from elementary schools,” geography professor Dr. Julie Laity said. “One blackboard had pictures of ABC’s, apples, dogs and very little blackboard space to write on.”

Laity said most of her students stayed enrolled despite the difficulties and the series of aftershocks that made students anxious and edgy. She said it was an especially difficult time for students who had been directly

affected by the quake. Some students suffered damage to their homes and some lost their cars when the campus parking structure collapsed.

The biggest challenge for Laity came when she had to teach her Atmosphere class in a trailer she shared with a Pan African group. There was no wall to divide the students and Laity was forced to lecture while standing 20 feet away from the other professor. She said she found herself getting distracted by something interesting the other professor would say, and she would lose focus.

Despite the trials of the post-quake environment, the awkward circumstances did not put a damper on Laity's class time.

"My classes stayed full. Students were better. It brought everyone together and even more focus on studies," Dr. Laity said. "I had really good students that semester."

One year after the quake, CSUN received a visit from President Bill Clinton. He commended the CSUN community for pulling together, its hard work and efforts to restore the campus. The President highlighted the fact that the library was repaired in 64 days.