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Length	19 min
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Speaker 1: You're listening to a special edition of MySafe:LA's Fire and Life Safety podcast remembering the Northridge earthquake 20 years later.

Todd Leitz: Welcome to another in or special series of MySafe:LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. I'm Todd Leitz, Public Information Officer from MySafe:LA and I'm joined by the county chief Steve Ruda of the Los Angeles Fire Department.

Chief, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with us on this important anniversary.

Steve Ruda: Yes, it is an important anniversary and thanks for having me.

Todd Leitz: Sir, what was your rank and assignment with the LAFD at the time of the Northridge quake?

Steve Ruda: I was a captain at Fire Station 27 in the heart of Hollywood with the Los Angeles Fire Department, but I was scheduled to report for work at 6:30 on the morning of the quake and at 4:30 is when the quake hit. It was an unbelievable awakening.

Todd Leitz: As I understand it, you live in the epicenter. You were living in Northridge at the time.

Steve Ruda: Yes, my family and I, and of course it was holiday weekend so I had my wife, my two daughters, but my son was spending the night at a friend's house. He was not in the house. He was up in Granada Hills and we are about 1/2 mile, about 3/4 of a mile from the epicenter, from basically Reseda and Lassen, just about a mile from the Northridge Meadows.

When that earthquake hit, I thought it was my wife waking me up for work. I didn't feel the bolt at first, but realizing I said, I'm up, I'm up, thinking I was late for work. Then I realized what was going on and I pulled her immediately from the bed and we took refuge in the area right next to the mattresses on the floor.

That's a good thing because we had a picture over our bed and when the earthquake started to take off, the picture came off the wall and slid like a guillotine right between the mattress and the headboard. If my wife had still had been in bed if I'd not pull her to the ground, I'm sure she would have received a significant head wound.

Once the shaking started, I left my wife there and as being a professional firefighter, we've been into very tough situations, but it's always much more tougher when you hear the cries of your children coming from the darkness of a swaying building that your own home.

I left my wife, I pulled her into the middles of our upstairs. We have a 2 story house and I went to the bedrooms where the girls were at and I told them to come to my voice. She said, "We don't see you. We don't see you." I said just come to my voice, come to my voice. We got them out of the bedroom and we took shelter at the top of the stairway. That place was good because there were no windows, no doors, no furniture that could collapse on us and Todd, it was like a freight train was going through our downstairs house as we were being shook. It was quite an experience.

Todd Leitz: Wow. Describe that shaking. You mentioned it was like a freight train or that was the sound that people often describe that, but being so close to the epicenter, you guys must have been rocking and rolling.

Steve Ruda: Actually, the house itself, pretty sturdy built house, but you could hear things breaking and crashing and windows breaking and the wall outside of our home had collapsed, so you hear all this thundering, clapping noise. The audio remembrance of car alarms echoing down the neighborhood as the cars were being shaken so their car alarms were going off.

I was able to keep calm because I knew the Christmas before, I had prepared earthquake kits for all of my family and placed them underneath the beds. I knew that I could get my family outside, come back to the house and get all the earthquake kits, quickly grab them and get them out to them so that they were able to dress. 4:30 in the morning, we're still all in our night clothes. I had the children dress, put on shoes, have a jacket. We had water, we had things that we needed immediately. That really brought a sense of calm to me that we were safe and then I had to go retrieve my son. My son stayed up in Granada Hills and that was a devastation up there as well. We had to cross Balboa and Rinaldi area and that's where the gas lines broke.

Todd Leitz: Yes.

Steve Ruda: And the water mains broke. We had to cross Balboa and I looked to my left and all I see is flame, like the tallest buildings, coming out of the street and geysers of water from broken hydrants and water mains. I went to retrieve my son so I could bring my family all back together and then we were able to set up a secured area at my home, where we were able to take all my earthquake kits that I had for my children.

I had also prearranged to have trash barrels on wheels that I had filled with food and water and medical supplies and tools and equipment. Pulled them out rapidly and established a family command post if you will, and being able to help other neighbors that weren't necessarily ready as we were.

Then again, this seemed like it was going on forever and then I still had to report for work as I was duty, as of 8:00 that morning. I knew that if my house was in the epicenter, how else must the rest of the city be?

Once I got my family secured, we were able to communicate to our families. My father-in-law has a motor home and he was out in the desert so they were unaffected. We told him we need his motor home rapidly so he made plan to come into the city and bring the motor home so we would have a place to live prior to my coming back from duty, which I was on duty for 3 days.

When I got to work at Fire Station 27, nobody was going home. We were all on duty, the oncoming shift. Firefighters were coming on duty and I knew my wife and family were secured and we went to work. Companies were being brought out to the valley, a lot of fires in the valley, but fortunately, all the fires were contained by 11:00 that morning, which is kind of a miracle in its own right, and then reported to work in Hollywood.

We had some several issues in Hollywood: gas line ruptures, couple of structure fires. Later that night, I went back to the valley, got my family and I told all my other firefighters, if you want your family to stay with you at the fire station, let us make a plan for them to come. They all went back to get their families, one at a time, and brought their families to the fire station so then felt safe and all together. As firefighters, how can you function when you've got in the back of your mind, how's my family? Is my family OK?

Being prepared is the key. You can't predict these things. You can't predict emergencies, but you can prepare. I think that's what MySafe:LA has done to the community by teaching us all and the importance of the fire department of Los Angeles and all the fire departments in Southern California. It's not a matter of if, it's just a matter of when. We have to be prepared. That's the key. We can't predict, but we can prepare and we've come a long way since those early 90's.

Todd Leitz: We certainly learned a lot from the Northridge earthquake about automatic gas valve shut offs and things like that. Your big takeaway from that day was the preparedness aspect of it. You felt like you could really do your job better because you knew your family was OK, because you had actually given them, what at the time probably wasn't a very fun Christmas present--disaster packs for everybody. But boy, I'm sure everybody was pretty thankful that you had this.

Steve Ruda: I must admit, they did tease me, but I don't care.

Todd Leitz: Yeah.

Steve Ruda: When that morning came and they were warm, they had shoes on, they were out of their pajamas, we had a plan, we notified our family to let them know we were OK. God bless my wife, she went back into the house soon after all the aftershocks were stopping and she started the massive clean up. My house was as if it was tipped upside down, shaken violently and then right sided back up. It was an absolute mess. Time again, I show the pictures of our home to friends who've never endured an earthquake and a picture tells a thousand words, that's for sure.

Todd Leitz: I would love to see some of those pictures some time Chief.

For a lot of us, the idea of getting ready for an earthquake is somewhat overwhelming. I always counsel people to kind of break it down a little bit and try to do a little in pieces. Maybe do one thing every weekend for several weeks. What do you think about that idea?

Steve Ruda: Catastrophes are overwhelming, no doubt about it. Everyone has the apathetic attitude. Well, it's not going to happen to me. I think that's probably the best way how to do it because if you do it all at one time, and you go to different hardware stores that are around and go in and spend all the money and what do you get and how do you do it? The simple little things of what you could do in your own home by having the tools and equipment, showing your family how to use them, teaching them where the gas meter even is, where the water meters are and how to use the special tools that you've either had taped ... From my home, I've got wrenches taped to the gas and just because there's an earthquake, doesn't mean you shut the gas off. Only if you smell gas is when you shut the gas off. That's a big misnomer is that people think, oh my God, an earthquake, I've got to shut the gas off. The only reason why you shut the gas off is if you smell gas.

I think you've certainly got it right. A little bit at a time and then you practice it and then you move on to the next thing and you practice that. But, once you have plan, I can tell you from personal experience, that we gathered in the backyard, we had a location where we were to meet, we had a communication plan to call my in-laws to bring their motor home. We had a plan and when you have a plan, honestly, I was comforted because I knew what we had to do.

We weren't as destructive as Northridge Meadows. Our house had significant damage, the walls were down. We had knickknacks, broken things, cracked walls, things like that, but intact for the most part. Our house was livable and we just had to clean up the mess and put everything back in its closets and we were good to go.

Since that time, my encouragement to my family and to my wife is that the menageries that are around on table tops or on shelves in the kitchen, or shelves in the living room, where are those things going to be going in a time of emergency? We've had things secured down, big pieces of furniture, television sets, things like that, because literally, everything was down off the wall-- pictures, the TV that was on the ledges.

I think your idea of a little bit at a time is the way to go because it's not overwhelming and to breach the fact of apathy, that it won't happen to me. That's the biggest thing too is crossing that bridge.

Todd Leitz: You, back in 1993, were already thinking about earthquake preparedness and had already made a plan for your family before the Northridge earthquake hit, which gave you that sense of calmness and ability to act and not panic, and just run out of the house or something.

Steve Ruda: Right. When I used to be an instructor in the Fire Academy, they say that a true leader is someone who can keep his head or her head when all about them are losing theirs. I think at the time, that's 20 years ago, I'm 15, 16 years on the fire department and instructor of the academy for many years and a captain in a very prominent station in Hollywood, if I don't lead and I don't have my firefighters prepared, or my family prepared, then what type of leader am I? I'm just all words and no action.

I encourage family households, whether you're a single parent, or father or mother, take the time and spend with your children and practice and drill. This weekend might even be a good time to say, this weekend, we're going to practice what exit drills in the home.

Todd Leitz: It really is that simple. Like I was saying, you were so prepared before the Northridge earthquake, it's 20 years later, was there anything that you learned from the quake itself that would allow you today to be more prepared?

Steve Ruda: It's interesting, I thought I was smart, but we all know our wives are smarter. I had tall trash cans that were filled with all of our materials and it was on wheels, but she told me two weeks ago, I can't manage that trash can. So, we went and got smaller, kind of a treasure chest or a hope chest or a cedar chest style of compartment on wheels, that she could manage.

I never thought about that because sometimes you think, well I'll be home when this catastrophe hits. What if I'm not home and she has to move that material by herself? She would never had been able to do it. I never thought about it. I never thought that my wife could not handle that and so we just transferred all of our supplies. We went through our supplies, as a matter of fact, and I transferred

them to the lower chest-like containers, Rubber Maid, things that are out there that are available for us to purchase, so that a kid could take it or a wife could take it. Not the husky firefighter, who could handle the 30 gallon trash can on wheels.

Todd Leitz: We also have to remember that as time goes by, our own physical abilities change, so we have to change what we're able to handle and what we're able to move around and so forth. We have to move with the times.

What are some of the things that you put together for your home to make sure that you've got everything you need in case you're on your own for 3 to 5 days after an earthquake?

Steve Ruda: I'm thinking to myself, what was interrupted? We just saw here recently on the east coast where a community in the Virginia's didn't have running water. They didn't any water for 3 or 4 days. I realized that water and hygiene are probably one of the most important items that we overlook and we take for granted.

I also filled my earthquake kits with food that could be mixed with water to be able to survive, because you might not have the cooking facilities, you might not have the tools and equipment necessary to cook. I've got things in the kits that could be mostly mixed with water: pastas, noodles, soup, things that easily can be fixed.

Cooking materials that you can go to the army surplus stores and purchase these things. You can go online and find things that will ... You can take a grocery cart and go to the 99 cent store and get some many many things that could fit your budget to get through foods and acquire things including candies and some other things that the children might need--coloring books, reading material, glasses.

One of the biggest things I realized, that a flashlight was just a tall cylinder to store dead batteries. It's interesting because I check my flashlights all the time, because light and knowledge is so much important, because knowledge is power. Fear is lack of knowledge. The reason why people fear is that they don't know what to do is because they have no knowledge on what to do.

Sometimes, it's right at your fingertips--a phone book, that you might have stuffed in a drawer in the kitchen. Inside of a phone book, there are disaster preparedness tips, things that you can communicate or look to who can help you in time of need, how to call the fire department, how to contact your neighbors, how to contact your family. Those are some of the things that I'm constantly re-evaluating. Every weekend that I have free, I'm thinking about what can I do to prepare?

Todd Leitz: Chief, thank you so much for your knowledge, your perspective, your experience will surely help all of us who are listening here prepare for the next damaging earthquake that hits here in Southern California. I really appreciate it.

Steve Ruda: I would like to thank also MySafe:LA for the work you do, not only in our schools, but preparing our communities for the work that has to be done and it's a great partnership. We're very proud of you and really appreciate what you're doing.

Todd Leitz: Thank you so much Chief.

Join us again for this ongoing series of special MySafe:LA Fire and Life Safety podcasts featuring your LAFD first responders, who stood ready that day 20 years ago and they stand ready today to help save lives and property no matter what. I'm Todd Leitz for MySafe:LA.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to a MySafe:LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. MySafe:LA is the public education partner of the Los Angeles Fire Department. Visit us at mysafela.org and lafd.org.

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