

Welcome to the Wilderness!

Have you ever played Musical Chairs? Guess what -- we're all playing it **right now**. Ready, and.... FREEZE!

We just had a 7.9 earthquake, like the one that occurred here in 1989. Let's assume we all made it out of the building OK, with no severe injuries, but the quake knocked a home off its foundation in our neighborhood. Then a gas line exploded, and now a fire is raging, but firetrucks can't come because they are handling bigger problems elsewhere.

Sadly, through no fault of your own, your house catches fire and burns to the ground, before you can get there to pull anything out. Everything you own in the world ... is now in your car.

Because of the quake, phones don't work, and will be down for several days. The internet is down, too, because there's no electricity, and won't be for weeks. There's no running water, either.

Cars can't drive anywhere, because overpasses have collapsed and fallen debris is clogging most roads. Without power, running water, or the ability to communicate on a phone, you are now, effectively... in the wilderness.

Not only are you in the wilderness, you might be injured and ON YOUR OWN. When a major disaster occurs, like the quake and tsunami that happened in Japan 2 years ago, or Hurricane Sandy, which flooded much of New Jersey and New York City last year, or the typhoon that hit the Phillipines last month, or Katrina in 2005, ambulances and police and firefighters become very busy, so they might not be able to respond right away. Maybe not even for days.

Without a phone, how will you contact your loved ones? Will you be able to help anyone who is hurt? I forgot to mention, it's December, and it's raining... How will you survive??

In such a situation, CERT volunteers are activated to help out. Who can tell me what CERT stands for? (Community Emergency Response Team) CERTs are volunteers who are trained to help when a major disaster happens.

They can do basic first aid and they know how to do light search and rescue operations, like knocking on doors to make sure everyone in the neighborhood is OK, especially older folks.

Some neighborhoods might not have any CERTs nearby, though. In this case, do you know what you should do to be ready? Does your family have a disaster plan written down?

To learn how to prepare, your Mom or Dad can go thru CERT training, which is a 3 hour class once a week for 6 weeks. I went thru the training because I want to be able to help my family and my neighbors and be "in the loop" if a disaster happens.

CERTs learn how to create and keep what's called a "Go Kit" in their car, since your car is usually where you are. Importantly, I don't park my car in my garage. Can anyone guess why? (in case my garage collapses or burns)

In my Go Kit are first aid supplies, basic tools, and emergency clothing & food. At a minimum, everyone should keep a gallon of water, a blanket, and a wind-up flashlight in their car. I also keep more extensive emergency supplies in my home, where I can access them quickly and easily. Here are some questions to test your readiness:

If parents are unable to come get their kids from school, does the school know your family's disaster plan? Does everyone in your family know your plan? Do you know the school's plan? What happens if kids aren't picked up and school officials have to go home to take care of their own families? (county child protective services = yikes!)

Let's assume you walk all the way home from school, and though your house has burned down, you find neighbors with whom you can take shelter. How do you know if their house is safe enough to enter? What subtle signs of danger should you look for? (standing water which might be electrified, or leaning walls)

Do you know where to look in a home for drinkable water when water lines are broken? (Water heaters, toilet supply tanks) Do family members who need medicine have an adequate supply? (such as insulin for diabetics)

The government has supply caches stored throughout the valley. Do you know where the nearest one is? (city hall)

When the power is out, credit cards won't work. Do you have a stash of cash somewhere safe and accessible?

Do you know a HAM radio operator who lives nearby? (You can get certified in an 8-hour class.)

If after a week without power or water, people start raiding homes to take what they need by force, what will you and your neighbors do? (no pat answer for this one)

Do you use extension cords in your home for other than temporary uses? I didn't realize that fires are often caused by these cords, because they are not designed for long-term use. Eventually they spark, causing fires.

Answers to all of these questions and more can be obtained by taking a CERT class. The City of Saratoga gives CERTs a vest, hardhat, an ID card, and a backpack in which to stow "go kit" items. CERTs train annually.

Please do something today to prepare yourself, not only for your sake, but for those around you. For more info on where to take a CERT class, go to www.citizencorps.gov/cert/ or www.nvoad.org or ask any fireman or policeman.

My CERT instructor was **Jim Yoke**, KI6HKZ, Emergency Services Coordinator, Santa Clara County Fire Department, 14700 Winchester Boulevard, Los Gatos, CA 95032, jim.yoke@cnt.sccgov.org 408-887-7818.