

Published February 1st, 2012

Orinda Village Seniors Tackle Emergency Preparedness

Cathy Dausman



Josephine Cao takes her turn Photo Cathy Dausman

An emergency preparedness class in Orinda is nothing unusual. But imagine trying to teach basic fire or medical training to senior citizens when their native language is a Russian or Chinese dialect, Spanish or Farsi. That is the challenge Rebecca Kunzman faced recently. Kunzman is a Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) instructor whose newest class at Orinda Senior Village has 18 participants, many of whom understand only limited English.

"All the students read English but about half do not understand the lectures entirely or even very little," she said. And a language barrier is just one challenge the group faced. Some can't lift heavy objects or move very quickly due to advanced age. As one senior commented, they "can't do things young, athletic CERTs can do, but they can do some things..."

Maryam Mojaver has lived at Orinda Village for 18 months. Her native language is Farsi, but Mojaver also needs a hearing aid. The advice she gave to those teaching the classes was: "speak slowly and loud."

Kunzman and fellow instructors Duncan Seibert,

Gordon Nathan, Robert Lipp and Fred Lothrop had hoped to locate volunteer interpreters to translate the oral portion of the class for their Chinese and Persian students. They had no luck. After contacting the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and state of California resource sites the instructors managed to obtain a written Spanish and Chinese dialect version of Putting Down Roots in Earthquake Country (<http://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/2005/15/>; also available in Vietnamese and Korean). That still left Kunzman with only a partial, hand-written Farsi translation and no Russian translation at all. Kunzman says the very sources she asked for help asked her to send them any translations she located.

Still, the seniors persisted, sitting politely through the lecture portion of their emergency training. Then it was outside to practice using fire extinguishers. Some found the extinguishers too heavy to lift, but those who did pulled the pin, squeezed the handle and extinguished the practice fire in seconds, beaming from ear to ear. They found that a smile translates easily into any language.

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