UC SANTA BARBARA
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Jim Medina

The Disaster Expert

In 1989, James Caesar faced a devastating human-caused environmental disaster — the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Then a member of an ocean cleanup team, he served as a liaison between the shipping company and regulatory agencies.

Twenty-six years later, Caesar — emergency manager for UC Santa Barbara — experienced a flashback to his “former life” when more than 140,000 gallons of crude oil spilled at Refugio State Beach. With contamination spreading to UCSB’s Coal Oil Point Reserve in Isla Vista, he rushed to help coordinate mop-up operations with emergency responders and university researchers.

“It’s always been my specialty to build partnerships,” Caesar said. “That’s what you need to respond to any emergency. You have to have the whole community involved.”

That’s not an easy task, according to John Sterritt, director of Environmental Health & Safety, Risk and Emergency Services at UCSB. Thanks in part to Sterritt’s five-page nomination letter, Caesar and Amanda McKenna, business continuity specialist, are recipients of the 2017 Innovation Award by the Campus Safety Health and Environmental Management Association (CSHEMA), the professional organization for campus safety specialists.

“Caesar and his team has completely re-engineered the emergency management program to focus on campus, local and regional emergency management needs for the past eight years,” Sterritt said. “The program has been built on leadership

commitment and well-defined organizational procedures to assure that recognized emergency management situations are evaluated, risk classified and prioritized."

Caesar is quick to note that the honor recognizes the hard work of the entire UCSB community, including campus partners in many departments and the university police.

"The team is everybody on campus," Caesar said, adding that he coordinates emergency services with agencies from Goleta, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara County and California. "Each UCSB department has a role on the team we would activate if there were an emergency on campus."

During the recent Whittier Fire, for instance, the university was on standby as a possible American Red Cross shelter for residents forced to evacuate their homes. Though it didn't occur, Caesar notified the UCSB recreation center (housing), parking department (signs), campus police (traffic control) and management (clearance) of the possibility.

"Everybody is informed when something happens," he said, adding that communicating during an emergency is "huge."

Always tethered to his cell phone, Caesar is meticulous about preparation and planning. He's even made sure his family even knows how to turn off the utilities at home if an earthquake strikes.

Why?

"Because I'll be responding to the UCSB community's needs," Caesar said.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.