

Finding Purpose Through Disaster

The Real-Life Inspirational Adventures of Michele Averill

by James E. Sullivan

On October 17, 1989, a disaster struck California. The 6.9 magnitude Loma Prieta Earthquake killed 63 people and collapsed a section of the upper deck of the Oakland freeway. The earthquake caused millions of dollars in damages, of which the effects are still being felt in the San Francisco Bay Area.

On that same day, 19-year-old dental assistant Michele Harris was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The diagnosis felt as earth shaking as the 6.9 magnitude earthquake. Michele felt her life was over.

Reeling from the devastating effects of the earthquake centered so close to Michele's home in Corralitos, her life felt as shattered as the infrastructures around her. Luckily, the strong support of her family, friends, and the vital resources of the UCSF Medical Center, including one of the world's most prominent brain surgeons, were readily available to provide comfort and healing to her in the midst of chaos.

New Purpose

This became a pivotal time in Michele's life. She not only survived the surgery, but her brain tumor was successfully removed, and she was well on her way to living a normal teenage life. Michele began to take a new look both in and outward toward the next steps of her life. Feeling the sheer joy of living, sparks flew, her spirit barely contained. She left the dental field and pursued a new career in healthcare that would provide a purposeful path forward. Understanding the uncertainty a person and family goes through while waiting for a diagnosis or treatment, she wanted to help patients and their families during those difficult times. Using both the triumph over the earthquake and tumor as metaphors, they gave Michele's life a new purpose. She let

neither the Loma Prieta Earthquake nor her brain tumor get the best of her.

The most compelling and inspirational sights she witnessed during those tent-city days of post-Prieta were the unflinching works of the Red Cross and other social service organizations that mobilized to feed the hungry, provide shelter and basic needs for families, and countless other silent and selfless acts of generosity and humanity. Simple acts by men and women of all races, creeds, and ages gave a glimmer of hope and belief that maybe tomorrow will be a better day. Seeing the tremendous efforts exerted by volunteers, who gave their all for others, with nothing asked in return, Michele resolved to become the best person she could, no matter the challenges.

Giving Back

Michele's work gave her several opportunities to give back to the community in a way that Michele sees success - bringing the right people together to achieve a common goal. "It's about collaboration and partnerships and those amazing people you surround yourself with. I love connecting people to make great things happen," Michele says. Michele was attending a Gilroy Rotary Club meeting, listened as the Master Gardeners of Silicon Valley presented their beautiful projects, and heard their need for more space to garden. Michele's love for gardening naturally made her want to help, and she worked with Saint Louise Regional Hospital in creating the South County Teaching and Demonstration Garden on the Saint Louise campus. Together they worked on fundraising for irrigation and other supplies to make the garden prosper and brought in the community to enjoy it - not only those who donated - but those who seemed to need it most, from the homeless to those who were recovering from illnesses. The food grown in the garden is donated to a local family service center.

The Blessing of Mentoring

Seven years into Michele's new career in healthcare, she was promoted to the CEO of the Foundation at Saint Louise Regional Hospital where she became very familiar with the Board of Directors. Mr. George Chiala Sr., who was the chair of the board, became a pillar of Michele's life. Chiala and his family were innovators in the ever-growing farming and agrarian industry in the area. Chiala was both a philanthropist and a force for positive change in people's lives within the community. Ms. Averill and Mr. Chiala became fast friends and, more importantly, Chiala took Averill under his mentorship wings.

Michele had survived the earthquake, the brain tumor, and under Mr. Chiala's tutelage, she would have the strength of character to grow while helping other people. They both shared the same passion for becoming catalysts for positive changes in other people's lives.

Expanding Opportunities to Serve

Michele left healthcare and moved to her current position as CEO of the Central Coast Chapter of the American Red Cross. Michele saw the unselfish efforts of the volunteers of all stripes, colors, and ages in her new work. She loves to share how the amazing cadre of volunteers performed selfless acts for others. Michele often wrestled with a question about their volunteers: "What makes the first responders, such as the police, fire, or EMT, run in to burning buildings and put their lives at risk? What makes a person volunteer day in and day out for the sake of giving others hope? The spirit that a better day is coming." Their reckless abandon was inspirational. In fact, 96% of the Red Cross workforce are volunteers. Amazing, remarkable, and inspirational people whose dedication and resiliency are contagious.

Michele loves hosting events to bring the community together. One of the most successful events is the Farm to Table Dinner. With an amazing group of local chefs donating their time, resources, and talent to the event, Michele organized the Annual Farm to Table Dinner at Carmel Valley Ranch. The goal was to help people learn about their local Red Cross chapter and the variety of services available, all while having a phenomenal meal. The event helps build relationships and connect people together.

Overcoming Adversity to Serve Others

The mentorship skills that George Chiala nurtured and grew within Michele gave her the ability not to limit herself, but to constantly improve upon her natural abilities and to prove to herself that the struggles she experienced only made her stronger. The mentorship gave Michele that chance to impart a legacy of her own, about making a difference in other people's lives.

Michele Averill is chief executive officer (CEO) of the Central Coast Chapter of the American Red Cross. As CEO of the chapter that serves the residents in Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Benito Counties, Averill oversees the work of six employees and almost 800 local volunteers who provide disaster support and other services to a population of approximately 750,000 residents. She and approximately 40 community leaders who serve on the chapter's two Boards of Directors strive to efficiently and effectively carry out the humanitarian mission of the Red Cross.



Michele works every day at the Red Cross. That cooperation goes beyond what most people think — of bringing disaster relief and blood supply — and extends to so much more, helping families of the armed forces and restoring family links

"It's an honor and privilege to help the Red Cross provide support to our three counties," Michele says. "Having the opportunity to do this kind of work with such a tremendous corps of volunteer and paid staff makes it especially rewarding."

Michele adds that the many individuals, businesses, and corporate partners providing support to the Red Cross play an essential role in the organization's success. "The resources we are able to provide during periods of greatest need only happen because of the generosity of our donors and volunteers. We could not do our work successfully without first building effective partnerships with community members, donors, and local agencies."

When Michele was asked what she wanted her legacy to be, she knew it would not be financial, but rather one that was more of an emotional impact. Michele's legacy is one where the people in her life and community know that she cared, that they can make a difference, and together they will make a community stronger. Michele found the greatest joy in believing in people and their abilities and helping them believe it for themselves. A legacy is not necessarily about leaving material items behind for people; it's about instilling a belief that resides within people.

Michele's legacy is one of compassion and caring, a legacy she learned through the values her parents, family, and friends instilled in her, and through surviving her own health battle. It is a legacy of inspiration and heart, of which George would be proud and would want others to be inspired to serve as well. Find out how you can help by [visiting redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org).



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