

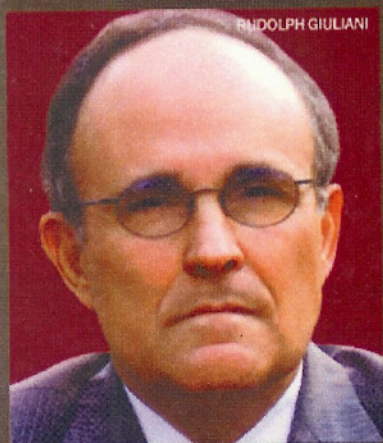
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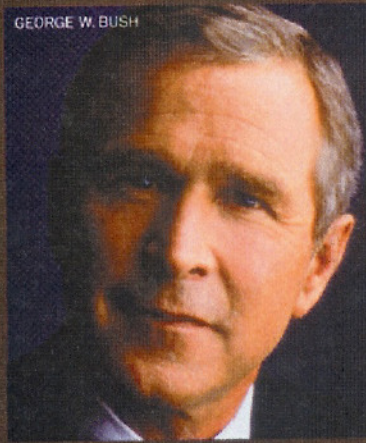
Every life has a story.



WHO AM I? SEE PAGE 18



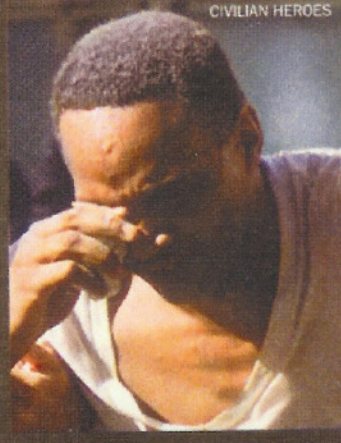
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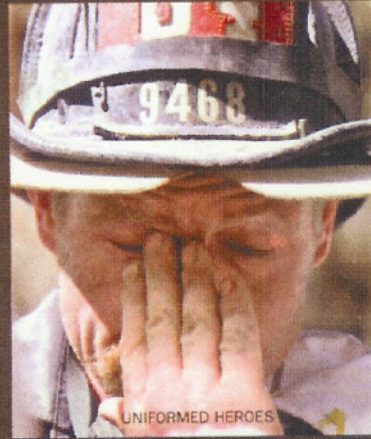
The Kindness of Strangers: Angel Volunteers

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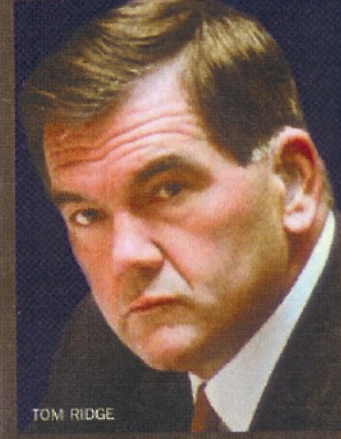
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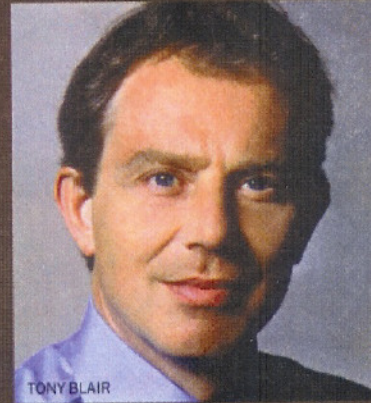
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The Kindness of Strangers

"Angel" Volunteers Comfort Victims of Tragedy

BY JANE MEREDITH ADAMS

Paramedics crashed through the doors of the Saddleback Memorial Medical Center emergency room doing CPR on a 2-month-old infant. The baby's mother ran behind, her eyes locked on the tiny form on the gurney. While CPR continued, a doctor inserted a breathing tube into the baby's airway and a needle in his shin for an IV. What the doctor didn't say, what no one said, was that it was hopeless.

When CPR failed and drugs didn't restart the infant's heart, the doctor, Robert W. Kingston, turned to the mother. "I'm so very sorry," he said. "There's nothing else to be done."

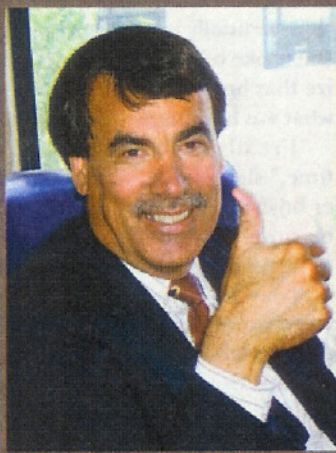
Her face twisted with grief. Just then the charge nurse hurried over to say that Kingston was needed elsewhere in this Laguna Hills, California, ER. A man was having a heart attack in bed 2; a bleeding woman was heading for shock in bed 7. He hated to leave this distraught mother.

Suddenly a calm woman with a name badge appeared. "My name is Julie, and I'm a TIP volunteer,"

she told the mother. "I'm here to be with you."

Kingston rushed on to the next emergency, relieved to have a TIP volunteer on the scene. "She is a godsend," he said later. "She's here, trained, and knows what to do."

TIP, short for Trauma Intervention Program, is the brainchild of Wayne Fortin, a former mental health counselor who 17 years ago launched a crusade to train ordinary citizens to offer aid and comfort to victims of tragedies. Today, more than 1,500 TIP volunteers are on the scene across the country at drownings, car accidents, bank robberies, and other disasters, including the recent terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. "We



Wayne Fortin, one-time mental health counselor and founder of TIP, Trauma Intervention Program



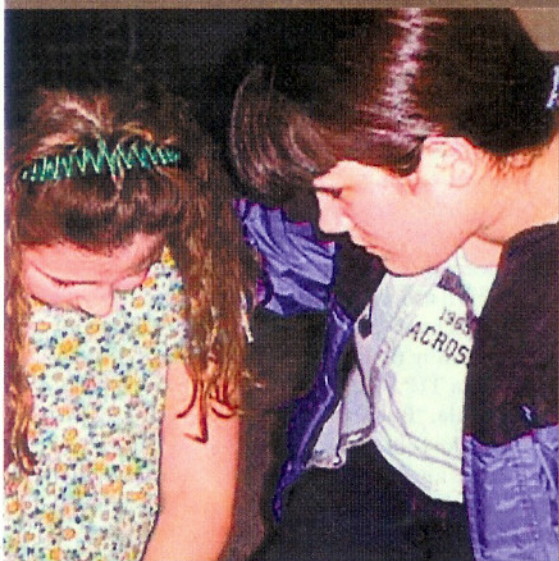
TIP has more than 1,500 volunteers trained to provide emotional support and words of comfort for survivors at the scenes of disasters like the car accident shown here



Tragedy victims' families often feel ignored during a crisis. TIP fills the void, offering a hand to hold, a shoulder to cry on



Program managers proudly display "I survived TIP training camp" T-shirts at an annual retreat



A new TIPteen program trains young people how to offer solace to other youths during an emergency



TIP volunteers come from all age groups and walks of life; 85% of them are female

weren't at Ground Zero, but we were helping family members around the country," says Fortin. They protect families from intrusive television crews, track down doctors and nurses to provide medical information to victims' relatives, entertain children in hospital corridors, describe the steps the coroner will take, and, most important, listen to those who are in emotional pain.

"The most common word to describe our volunteers is 'angel,'" says Fortin, 53. "They dive into horrific situations and work magic."

The idea of training volunteers to help in the immediate aftermath of a crisis came to Fortin in 1985, when he was a counselor at the North Coastal Mental Health Center in Oceanside, California. Time and again, clients who had gone through a terrible loss told him what stuck in their minds was a feeling of being alone—ignored and mistreated during the crisis. “They’d say, ‘I still can’t forgive the doctor for the way he told me,’ or ‘I’ll never forget the way the paramedics carried my baby out like a football,’” says Fortin.

The trauma causes the primary injury and the handling of it causes the secondary injury, he notes. It is this second blow that Fortin believes can be avoided. He recalls, “My idea was, How can we prevent this bad memory? How can we make things go right on the scene?”

Fortin also heard a number of police officers express concern over what happened when they responded to a fatal car accident or a suicide. “One of their biggest stressors was leaving all these distraught people behind,” says Fortin, who has taught stress management classes to police in San Diego County. He doesn’t fault the emergency responders. “They don’t have the time to go over to the grief-stricken mother,” he says.

So when the Oceanside mental health center received funding to start a community program in 1985, Fortin launched TIP. There was just one problem: The phone rarely rang. Police were reluctant to call TIP volunteers to emergencies. “It goes against their nature,” says Fortin. “They want to keep people out of these scenes.”

Fortin got to work selling the program even harder. A slim man with a ready laugh despite the serious nature of his work, Fortin cajoled, prodded, and used his sense of humor to convince officers that a TIP volunteer would make their job easier. And slowly, the calls began to come.

Word-of-mouth was positive and in 1991, the program received even more impressive validation: It won the prestigious Innovations Award, co-sponsored by the Ford Foundation and Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. The prize included \$100,000 for TIP to replicate its program nationwide. More recently, Fortin traveled to Washington, D.C., to receive a 2000 Crime Victim Service Award from then-Attorney General Janet Reno and the U.S. Department of Justice.

For Fortin, the awards capped a lifetime of fighting for the underdog. “I always seemed to be the kid in the schoolyard who was looking out for the kid who was getting

beat up,” he says. The oldest of six children, he grew up in Waterbury, Connecticut, and North Miami Beach, Florida, the son of a college English professor mother and a father who worked in a hospital purchasing department. After graduating from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, he earned a master’s degree in psychology at George Williams College in Downers Grove, Illinois, before deciding to head



Hospital staff is often too busy with patients to console spouses; that’s where TIP comes in



Some who join TIP have been through traumas themselves and find healing by helping others

west to California to work as a therapist. In 1997, he left his county mental health job to work full time on TIP, which had become a nonprofit organization in 1989. He and his wife, Deanna, an insurance agent and TIP volunteer, live in Vista, California, with Clancy, their Jack Russell terrier.

TIP programs are now in place in California, Washington, Oregon, Massachusetts, Arizona, Florida, and Georgia. Volunteers range in age from 21 to 80; 85% are women. The organization’s most recent addition is a TIPteen program to train young people to

help their peers at the scene of a crisis while under the supervision of an adult from TIP.

What prompts someone to become a crisis volunteer? Some have been through their own traumas and find healing in giving back. “If I could help somebody else on the worst day of their lives, it would be good,” says Jackie Boisa of Rio Oso, California, who went through TIP’s training program after her daughter Cheryl died at age 13 from a sudden illness. “It helps me to help other people.”

Mary Frey, 41, a TIP volunteer in Crestview, Florida, lost her 2-year-old daughter, Kathleen, who suffered from an intestinal illness. For her, the toughest TIP call was a 6 A.M. request to wait with a mother at a hospital while an ambulance brought in the body of her baby, who had just died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Frey stayed with the parents as they rocked their infant. She didn’t reveal that she’d lost her own child, but she did cry with them. “We can’t cry any longer or harder than the client,” she says. “But we’re allowed to show that emotion.”

Part of what seems to make TIP so effective is its rigorous 60-hour training program. While the volunteers are caring people by nature, they are taught how to avoid being *too* caring—they’re not allowed, for instance, to keep in touch with the people they help beyond one follow-up phone call or note. Nor do they ever deliver the message that someone has died—they leave that task to medical officials. And they don’t offer platitudes like “everything is okay” when, at that moment, everything plainly is *not* okay.

“We’re a caring presence,” says Fortin, who has personally responded to calls that involved sitting with a mother on a beach while she waited to find out that her son had drowned and helping an elderly woman stop clinging to the body of her deceased husband. “People in shock really appreciate someone who sits down with them when everyone else is freaked out.”

Is it awkward to be a stranger at a disturbing scene? “I thought it might feel as if we’re invading their privacy,” says Sharon Biswell, 45, a TIP volunteer from Kingsboro, California. “But it’s not. They grasp onto you.”

The calls come 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and about 80% involve a death. A police or fire dispatcher contacts the TIP dispatcher, who calls a volunteer. A mad dash to the scene ensues; TIP’s goal is to arrive within 20 minutes.

Volunteers come equipped with pocket-

sized packs of tissues, a grief-and-funeral resource pamphlet, a flashlight, a safety vest, a rain cape, and a pen and paper. On average, the volunteer's stay lasts for two hours, but it can be much longer. Michelle Gray, 54, of Pensacola, Florida, responded to a 7 p.m. call during the Fourth of July weekend to comfort the family of an 8-year-old boy whose arm had been bitten off by a shark at Pensacola Beach, a case that made headlines nationwide.

Gray met the child's extended family at the hospital where he was undergoing surgery. (Incredibly, his uncle had wrestled the shark onto the beach and rescue workers had obtained the arm, which was reattached.) With his siblings and cousins wet and cold, Gray rounded up a hospital representative to find blankets, pillows, and scrubs small enough to fit the children. She



Fortin won the prestigious Department of Justice Crime Victim Service Award in 2000. Above, Attorney General Janet Reno congratulates him during a special ceremony on Capitol Hill

Finding the Right Words: What to Say, What Not to Say to Comfort Crisis Victims

Most of us have tried to comfort someone who suffered a great trauma or loss. And chances are most of us felt we didn't say quite the right thing. TIP founder Wayne Fortin observes that the most common mistakes made by the well-meaning include minimizing the loss and placating the grieving person. The next time you are called upon to give "emotional first aid," TIP offers the following suggestions:

Do say:

"Please tell me what happened."

"I'm so sorry."

"This must be very difficult for you."

"It's okay to feel..."

"I don't know what to say."

"Can I call someone to come for you?"

"Can I get you something to drink or a bite to eat?"

Don't say:

"I know how you feel."

"Calm down!"

"It could be worse."

"Don't cry."

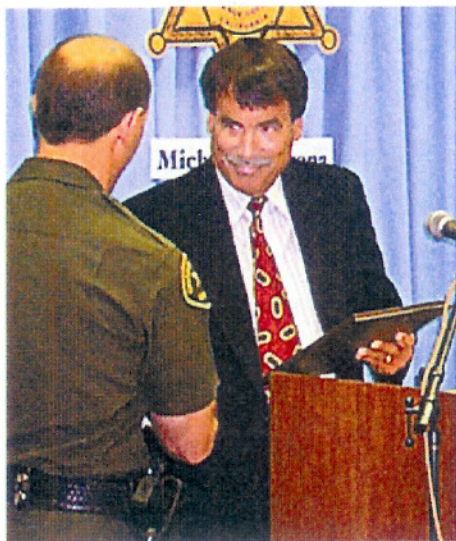
"God had His reasons."

"I'll take care of everything!"

When a baby has died:

"It's obvious from what you've told me that you loved [Emily] very much."

"You can have another baby" or "She died young and avoided life's miseries."



Fortin gives Orange County, CA, sheriff Michael Carona a good Samaritan award for supporting TIP



Oceanside, CA, police captain Steve Scarano's support helped Fortin launch the TIP program

brought up hamburgers, French fries, and drinks from the cafeteria and arranged for the family to make telephone calls with no charge.

It was 5:30 in the morning when she finally left, her adrenaline still pumping. At home, she called a TIP supervisor for a mandatory debriefing session.

"About 99% of the TIP calls aren't traumatic to the volunteer," says Fortin. What keeps volunteers positive, he says, is knowing that they made a difference. In rare cases when the volunteer is quite agitated—such as a recent Southern California call

that involved the death of an infant and a 2-year-old child—Fortin suggests taking action. "Go home and wake up your kids and hug them," he says. "Go running or walking. Don't drink alcohol."

And get ready for the next call. ●

JANE MEREDITH ADAMS IS A WRITER BASED IN SAN FRANCISCO; SHE WRITES OFTEN FOR THIS MAGAZINE.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT TIP programs and volunteering, visit www.tipnational.org, call 714-314-0744, or write to Trauma Intervention Programs at 1420 Phillips Street, Vista, CA 92083.