Comfort in Times of Crisis

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This narrative describes the author's experience volunteering with her dog, Terra, for the HOPE Animal Assisted Crisis Response Organization. This crisis response team puts the human/animal bond to good use by comforting victims and aid workers in times of stress.

Another October 26th. This year, it was going to be a good one. The weather was brilliant, just the sort of warm, sunny day San Diego is famous for. I was running errands and feeling happy and grateful, thinking about how far my husband, Bob, and I had come in the three years since October 26, 2003, when the epic Cedar Fire had taken our home and nearly our lives. It was the worst and largest of multiple wildfires burning across Southern California during a two-week siege. Altogether they had destroyed 3,710 homes and taken the lives of 24 people. Twelve of those victims had lived in our community. Bob and I had since rebuilt our house and our lives, and in the process gained a deeper appreciation of life's intangible riches. Yes, I was thinking, we were blessed; life was good again. And then came the news headlines over my car radio – a big, wind-driven wildfire burning out of control 125 miles away near Palm Springs, three firefighters dead, two more in critical condition. My throat tightened, and I felt sick. October 26th, and it was all happening again.

But this time, I wasn't helpless against the flames. This time, I could do something. Since the Cedar Fire, my Newfoundland dog, Terra, and I had become certified through HOPE Animal-Assisted Crisis Response (hopeaacr.org). As a HOPE team, we were trained and ready to offer "comfort in times of crisis" to victims, survivors, first responders, and others affected by traumatic events. Soon we were on our way to the Esperanza Fire base camp, headquarters for firefighters battling the blaze that had overtaken the crew of National Forest Service Engine No. 57. By this time, the fire was almost contained, and units were starting to demobilize. But a fourth firefighter had died, and the fifth man was not expected to survive. (He died a short time later.) Understandably, the mood in camp was grim. It was a perfect time for HOPE dogs to visit.

A fire base camp is a mobile city pieced together overnight near the site of a big wildfire. Convoys of tractor trailers bring in modular units that serve as administrative offices, kitchens, showers, and bunkhouses. Big tents house a dining area, as well as first aid, counseling, snack, and water stations. Smaller two- to four-person camping tents sprout up all around, providing extra sleeping quarters, and row upon row of fire engines and water tankers fill the parking lots. A really big fire takes days, sometimes weeks, to contain and can draw firefighting units from all over the country. It's not unusual for a fire base camp to accommodate up to 2,000 people for the duration of a major fire.

When Terra and I, along with my friend Carol Birch and her big Leonberger, Hoss, arrived at the Esperanza Fire camp, we checked in with our HOPE regional director by phone, snapped the dogs' vests into place, and began working our way down a long line of engines and crews. Most were packed up and waiting for official permission to leave; most looked exhausted and depressed. I almost hated to bother them. After what they'd been through in the past few days – fighting flames in rugged mountain terrain, losing four, possibly five colleagues, grappling with their own vulnerability – how could I walk up and say something as flippant as "Hi guys, how you doin'? Would you like to meet my dog?"

But I did, over and over again, because I knew that if I only broke the ice, Terra would take it from there, and the magic would kick in. Exhausted and depressed firefighters, whether chiefs, administrative staff, or ground "troops," would start to smile, perhaps for the first time in days. Many would squat down to ruffle Terra's fur and tell stories about the dogs waiting at home for them. Some would remember the HOPE dogs from a previous fire and rush over to say hello again, maybe take a photo or two. A few would even well up in a sudden release of emotion. Person by person, crew by crew, the mood of the entire camp would lighten.

Offering Comfort and Encouragement

HOPE volunteers are not mental health professionals, and we are not to assume that role. Rather, our job is simply to offer comfort and encouragement to people affected by traumatic events. Sometimes this simple task seems so natural, especially to the dogs, that it feels almost effortless. On Terra's and my first HOPE callout, also to a fire camp, I worried that despite our training, I was doing something wrong. Walking around, meeting people, and chatting about my dog didn't seem like enough to qualify as "therapy," much less "crisis response." It was all so ordinary, so normal. "But that's just it," a veteran HOPE member reassured me. "Sharing our dogs with people under stress, separated from their families and their own pets, brings them a little bit of normalcy, a little bit of home. And that makes a big difference."

HOPE Animal-Assisted Crisis Response traces its origin to a 1998 school shooting in Springfield, Oregon. Two certified animal-assisted activities/therapy (AAA/T) teams were asked to help comfort students, parents, and staff affected by that horrific event. The positive response to those canine therapy teams revealed two founding principles of animal-assisted crisis response: 1) AAA/T teams could help people cope with crisis situations, offering the same benefits already documented in traditional AAA/T work, and 2) both canines and handlers should be specially trained for maximum effectiveness in crisis-response work. Three years later canine therapy teams volunteering at Ground Zero following the September 11th terrorist attacks discovered a further fundamental fact about animal-assisted crisis-response work: it helps not only victims and survivors of traumatic events, but first responders as well.

In fact, one of the great advantages of animal-assisted crisis response is the socially acceptable comfort and stress relief a friendly dog can provide to emergency workers. The toughest, most stoic firefighters, paramedics, or police officers might never admit, even to critical-incident stress counselors from their own agencies, that they feel traumatized by the sights, sounds, and smells of a disaster. But many of these same individuals will hug a dog without any sense of weakness or shame. And in that exchange, as many have reported, something happens. It's as if the dog wicks away and absorbs the human's pain and negative emotions, offering in exchange unconditional acceptance and a generous dose of that quintessential canine attribute: joy. And that interaction, to most people—especially those in acute emotional need—feels a lot like love. Such is the mystery of the human-animal bond, the foundation of all animal-assisted therapy.

Today, HOPE Animal-Assisted Crisis Response is a national, all-volunteer, 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation with more than 90 trained and certified teams, grouped into five geographical regions covering 23 states. Each year, additional teams are certified via screening and training workshops held in each area. HOPE's goal is to develop a nationwide network of certified teams, allowing us to continually expand our availability. Since we never barge into an incident uninvited, but rather work through the agencies in charge, growing visibility and awareness of animal-assisted crisis response among relief and emergency organizations will also enable HOPE teams to help in more and more crisis situations.

HOPE teams have thus far responded to a wide range of disasters, including Hurricane Katrina, the Virginia Tech shooting, numerous wildfires, and two commuter train derailments in Los Angeles. We've also provided support in emotionally challenging situations, such as

Operation Purple summer camps for children of military families affected by the Iraq war and "Every 15 Minutes" high school programs that simulate the emotional fallout on friends and families of students killed in drunk-driving crashes. Whether visiting with exhausted firefighters, grieving survivors, or worried evacuees sleeping on cots in Red Cross shelters, HOPE dogs have lightened thousands of heavy hearts all across the country. Meanwhile, HOPE handlers enjoy the privilege of watching this transformation occur dozens, even hundreds, of times during a single call-out.

Stamina and Flexibility Required

While making our way down the long line of fire engines at the Esperanza Fire base camp, Carol and I met a crew from Idyllwild, the tiny mountain community where the burned firefighters had been based. They seemed especially appreciative of our visit and invited us to bring the dogs to their home station and to attend the upcoming public memorial service for the lost firefighters. We promised that we would.

Next we visited a few of the office trailers, where one dog-loving fire chief handed out "critical incident command" pins for the dogs' vests. Terra and Hoss had been working for a couple of hours by now; it was time to give them a rest. Finding a spot of grass, we sat down with a few other HOPE teams who'd been working the opposite side of the camp. Within moments, a fire captain who happened also to have a Newfoundland at home spied Terra and came rushing over. He sat there in the grass with her for a long time, rubbing her belly, taking pictures, sharing photos and stories about his own Newf. I got the impression that those few moments with Terra were the highlight of that fire captain's week. He later e-mailed me the photo I'd taken at his request – a wonderful portrait of Terra and her new friend, who was all smiles even after a hellacious week on the firelines.

After our break we headed back to "Main Street," the group of trailers devoted to the administrative business of running a big firefight, where we met the director of California's state firefighting agency. He had heard about the HOPE dogs in a briefing and greeted us and our canine partners warmly. Soon even the "big chief" was sharing stories about his own dog. By now it was dark, and we were all getting tired. We decided to walk over to the chow line for a last quick round of visits and then leave. But we hit the dining area right at shift change, and group after group of exhausted, hungry firefighters kept showing up for dinner. Terra was amazing. I knew she was tired, but she wasn't ready to quit. She just kept wading in, greeting people, melting even the toughest-looking of the inmate firefighters. We must have met hundreds of people, and nearly all were delighted to see the dogs. Seeing the pins on Terra's vest collected during previous callouts, one firefighter dug into his pack, brought out a yellow highlighter, and clipped it on among the other souvenirs. "I just want to give her something," he explained.

Carol and I had planned to spend two days visiting the Esperanza camp, but because of the Idyllwild firefighters' invitation, we decided to drive there the next morning. Walking into the National Forest Service station at Idyllwild—home base of the ill-fated engine crew—was a sobering experience. The lobby counter was crowded with cards and flowers. A pair of firefighters' boots had been set among them to collect donations for the bereaved families. Our HOPE regional director had arranged our visit with a Forest Service supervisor, but the ranger at the reception counter hadn't received that message and didn't know quite what to make of us. A big meeting was under way elsewhere in the building, and members of the Critical Incident Stress Management team assigned to help the families kept popping in and out, intent on their work.

Because crisis situations are unpredictable by nature, crisis-response teams must stay flexible. Sometimes it's best just to back off and stay out of the way. This was one of those times. Wanting to be especially sensitive to the tragedy driving this situation, Carol and I decided to leave. As it happened, the Idyllwild town fire department was right next door, so we walked over. There we found the men we'd met at the fire camp, plus their chief and

a couple more colleagues, and spent a wonderful half hour or so with them. They were thrilled that we'd actually come to their station; each of them kept thanking us. Perhaps this was the real reason we had come to Idyllwild. Regardless, Carol and I counted our trip there well worth the time and effort.

Training for Crisis-Response Work

Like all canine therapy teams interested in becoming certified through HOPE, Terra and I were first active with a nationally recognized therapy organization, in our case, the Delta Society. We had attended a HOPE informational open house, followed a week or so later by a screening, which included health and behavioral checks, plus a role-play scenario mimicking an actual crisis situation. This orientation process makes clear to "HOPEfuls" the differences between AAA/T work and crisis response.

Unlike most therapy venues, crisis situations are unplanned and unpredictable, sometimes chaotic, and often intense. Clients may be distressed and emotional. Further, there likely will be no professional staff available, as in most therapy situations, to provide guidance, so teams must be self-sufficient. Therapy visits usually last only about an hour, but crisis-response callouts typically last several hours and can extend for days. Consequently, it's critical that we take frequent breaks and be on the lookout for signs of stress in ourselves, our dogs, and our fellow teams. Crisis-response work can also be more physically demanding than AAA/T visits. We are usually outside, in various kinds of weather, walking or standing for hours at a time. It's important, too, that we constantly monitor the environment to avoid conditions such as temperature extremes, poor air quality, or fuel spills that might be hazardous to us or our dogs. Finally, because of the additional equipment, training, and travel involved, crisis-response work costs significantly more than AAA/T volunteering. For these reasons, some therapy dog handlers who investigate crisis response choose not to pursue certification.

After passing the screening, Terra and I attended a three-day training workshop. Sessions included the basics of emotional first aid and self-care: what to say and not say, how to recognize symptoms of stress, when to detach from an incident, and how to decompress afterwards. We also covered the basics of canine behavior and learning theory. And we were introduced to the critical incident command system used by firefighters and other emergency responders. The workshop's final day, spent in the field, was the most fun. Handlers and dogs boarded a bus that took us first to a fire station for desensitization training. The dogs met firefighters in full turn-out gear, sniffed their equipment, walked around the fire engines, and experienced the distractions of lights and sirens, all within a safe environment. We next visited an airport to practice passing through security and boarding a plane with our dogs. Finally, we took our canine partners aboard a boat to experience traveling by water.

Only after performing well over this three-day training do dogs and handlers earn their certification as HOPE crisis-response teams. After that, ongoing membership requirements include at least 12 AAA/T visits per year; annual health checks for the dogs; current first aid/CPR and canine first aid training for the handlers; and participation in HOPE meetings, continuing education, and emergency-response drills.

Thank You for Being There

A week after our visits to the Esperanza Fire camp and Idyllwild stations, Terra and I joined eleven other HOPE teams at a public memorial service for the five fallen firefighters. We made a quiet statement of support and respect, walking in together and standing in line on a grassy hill behind an outdoor amphitheatre filled with several thousand mourners. Pinned to each dog's vest was a black ribbon, the same emblem worn by all the firefighters in attendance. The service was long, the sun was bright, and we had no shade, but the dogs did beautifully. Not one barked or became impatient, not even when bagpipers made their noisy entrance or when a squadron of tankers and helicopters flew directly over us in a final aerial salute.

After the service we all walked down to the amphitheatre area and visited with anyone who seemed interested. Even in that most

somber of situations, people could not help smiling when the dogs appeared. The last person Terra and I met before leaving was an information officer with the Bureau of Land Management, who immediately embraced Terra in a big hug. She knew intuitively why the dogs were there and without hesitation unfastened a pin from her uniform and attached it to Terra's vest. "This represents the Wildland Firefighters' Foundation," she explained. "We wear it to remind us of our losses." Indeed, the losses in this incident were heart-breaking. The five firefighters killed in the Esperanza Fire should have had so much more life ahead of them. The oldest was 42; the youngest, a mere 20. Compounding the tragedy, the cause of the fire was determined to be arson. What a sober reminder to us as HOPE volunteers of the dangers firefighters face and why it's so important to provide them with comfort and encouragement when the fires are raging.

No doubt the significance and benefits of canine crisis response are best expressed by those who have experienced the healing power of a cold, wet nose. "What you have done to help us may never be known to you or your partners," a California state battalion chief wrote me after the Esperanza incident. "But we appreciate the break away from the incident, the opportunity to focus on something else and to talk to a neutral person who is open to listen. As with our job, you rarely are rewarded for what you do, but I can tell you that your visits are well received... For me and my partners, thanks for being patient with us and there for us."

Personal Crisis Response

As much as I admire sweet Terra's unflagging willingness to greet every stranger she encounters with total acceptance and unbridled affection, sometimes I've questioned her motive. Is she really all that giving or is she just looking for attention? "People think she's a great therapy dog," my husband and I often joked, "but we know she's really just pathologically needy." A year after the Esperanza incident, Terra finally quashed our rude questions and comments once and for all.

We were coming up on yet another October 26th, the fourth anniversary of the Cedar Fire. Suddenly, the entire San Diego region was again hit with massive wildfires. Again, whole communities were under siege and hundreds of homes were burning. Half a million people were evacuated. Unbelievably to us, Bob and I were among them. Our own home was again in jeopardy. We moved in with friends and watched nonstop news reports as the fires edged repeatedly toward and away from our area. It was surreal. How could this be happening again, only four years after the Cedar Fire? At one point, before a shift in the wind turned the fire front away from our area, I reached full-blown panic mode. I felt nauseated from the stress and anxiety, yet I couldn't break away from the television or the computer. After a couple of hours of this, Terra got up, came over and started pestering me. I tried to shoo her away, but she wouldn't go. Instead, she kept nudging my hands with her muzzle, literally knocking my fingers off the computer keys. What could she want? She'd been out recently. It wasn't dinner time. Slowly, it occurred to me that perhaps Terra had sensed my anxiety and was trying her best to calm me down. Yes, I realized, that must be it. She was being my own personal crisis-response dog! I gave in then and set my laptop aside. Terra and I went outside, sat down on the ground, and cuddled up together. For the next 20 minutes or so, I let her deal with my stress in her own magical way. And that brief break was enough to help me regain a healthier perspective.

Fortunately for our family, this time our home was waiting for us when the evacuation orders were lifted. But thousands of others across the county were now setting out on the long road Bob and I had so recently traveled. On October 26, 2007, we'd planned to host a few friends for dinner, hoping to make that infamous day a good one for a change. Instead, Bob was manning an emergency center for new fire survivors, while Terra and I were out with another HOPE team, visiting fire base camps and Red Cross shelters. Some friends wondered how I could do such a thing, considering our previous fire experience, and after being evacuated most of the week myself.

"Don't you get it?" I wanted to say. "It feels good to help, to be able to do something." And now I knew, more than ever, how much help – and hope – a furry friend can bring in times of crisis.

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Terra and Cpt. Britten Miles at Esperanza Fire camp. Photograph by Sandra Younger.