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TRAGEDY ON THE BLANCO

Del Mar speaker explains technology used during Wimberley search



Credit: Gabe Hernandez

GABE HERNANDEZ/CALLER-TIMES file Friends of the Carey's, Charba's and the McComb's work on commuters and look at maps as they set up search groups Tuesday May 26, 2015 at First Baptist Church in Wimberley, Texas.

by Julie Garcia of the Caller Times

Posted: August 27, 2015 8:29 PM

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Kim Charba never thought about what goes into emergency management

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TOP



Credit: Gabe Hernandez

GABE HERNANDEZ/CALLER-TIMES file Friends of the Carey's, Charba's and the McComb's work on commuters and look at maps as they set up search groups Tuesday May 26, 2015 at First Baptist Church in Wimberley, Texas.



Credit: Andrew Mitchell

Andrew Mitchell/Caller-Times file Alan Daniel, Cristen Carey's Husband, talks to a large number of new volunteers about search strategy and safety before they embark on their search and rescue operation at First Baptist Church Saturday morning, May 30, in Wimberley.

operations before the Blanco River raged through Wimberley and swept away a vacation home where her family members were staying.

Three months later, Charba is still helping search for 6-year-old Will Charba and 4-year-old Leighton McComb who were lost in the Memorial Day flood.

Michelle Carey Charba; her husband, Randy Charba; her father, Ralph Carey; 6-year-old Andrew McComb; Andrew's mother, Laura Schultz McComb; and Michelle's mother, Sue Carey, all died in the flood.

Jonathan McComb, Leighton and Andrew's father and Laura's husband survived after pulling himself ashore and seeking help at a nearby home.

Search teams continue to use the technology and information they learned in the weeks after the disaster to figure out which areas need to be searched now that the Blanco River has returned to its banks.

"I'm still using our (geographic information system) every day. I use the collector app when I'm down in Wimberley on the river," Charba said. "If I can learn to use it, anybody can learn to use it. It's been a tremendous help."

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System architect Devon Humphrey gave a presentation on GIS as an emergency response tool at Del Mar College on Wednesday. Humphrey, who lives in Dripping Springs, has responded to several disasters, including Wimberley, the BP oil spill and Hurricane Katrina.

A GIS is designed to store, analyze, manage, change and present types of geographical and spatial data. They are used in the aftermath of natural and other disasters to get information to emergency management coordinators and teams to aid in decision-making and planning.

Humphrey said Wimberley and Hays County were not prepared for the disaster, though it is situated in what is called "Flash Flood Alley."

Two emergency efforts were working simultaneously in Wimberley in the first few weeks: the officials, which included Texas Task Force 1 and other agencies, and the Wimberley Rescue volunteers. Humphrey worked with the volunteers.

"These were volunteers, but they were doing very well. As I told them later that first day, they were resource rich. They just didn't have a lot of training," Humphrey said.

The biggest issues initially were figuring out who owned the land that needed to be searched and what weather was headed toward Central Texas. Both were addressed with the GIS through electronic maps and weather watches.

Almost immediately, Humphrey worked on deploying a cellphone app for search teams to use to collect data from the field. A simple app, teams could log which areas needed to be revisited with search-and-rescue canines,

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Friday's Top Performers

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which areas were cleared and also upload photos.

"The common operating picture replaced the paper maps, and we prepared for 25 search-and-rescue teams," he said.

"The day we showed up with the collector app ready to deploy, they told us we had 125 teams. There were 1,500 people who showed up that weekend."

Once the app was deployed, searchers were given a 60-second crash course in how to use it. Then dots starting popping up on the map in the common operation picture back at the command post, he said.

In two days, 584 points were logged on the map. Now, there are more than 700 points, he said.

"Teams are still collecting data who are going out in the weekends to search," he said. "By entering information in the notes like 'canine' or 'debris,' we could data mine that. The idea is if we take some of those critical keywords and create a heat map of those locations, we could identify hot spots to go back and search."

Charba said technology is still being used during weekend searches for the missing Corpus Christi children. She is grateful for the help Humphrey and his wife, Bonnie, provided.

"The fact they came to us in a time when we needed them — it's amazing," she said. "The collector app is really useful. The hot spots it showed, we're using all that information. It's a tremendous system."

Twitter: @Caller_Jules