

Sticking together

They were the glue — local residents and outside volunteers whose efforts held together a community in crisis.

For many in the area Thursday, the voice of sanity was MBC Radio. Broadcasting from their studio in the industrial park, less than a mile from the fire's heart, the MBC news team kept their listeners calm and informed from 1-11 p.m. Thursday.

Initially, no one at MBC had any idea how serious the situation would become, said news and sports announcer Dallas Hicks. "We were all watching the water bombers (around 12:30 p.m.) and then we got the word from our general manager that people were being evacuated," Hicks recalled.

"I just ran into the studio and threw on the mike, ... I just didn't want to leave. I wanted to make sure the information was out there from start to finish."

As calls began to flood into MBC, a team system quickly evolved, Hicks said. General manager Marty Ballantyne manned the phones and helped with the on-air coverage, while news director Kelly Provost kept in touch with the Town office and Hicks got regular updates from the provincial fire centre.

Meanwhile, MBC's Cree announcer Clarence Iron was in Beauval, reporting in with updates from the west side, translations of fire news for the station's Cree listeners, and sometimes a bit of humour or news on the Stanley Cup playoffs to lighten the mood.

With the danger so close by, Hicks initially found his fear level rising, until his boss put a one-word note by his side: "Safety."

"That kind of set me back a bit," Hicks admitted. "Since I was telling everyone else to be calm, I might as well be calm myself and get the information out there."

While Hicks was busy on the air, Laurie Zarazun was on the ground — running. Zarazun, the activities director at the La Ronge Health Centre and a town councillor, was about to leave on a field trip when she spotted the glow in the sky. Abandoning her plans, Zarazun raced to the nearby town office, where she met



up with fellow councillor Marshal Leswick. They quickly began organizing relief efforts for evacuees from the town's north end, gathering up food, blankets and medical personnel from the health centre, and arranging the use of vehicles.

Staff from Northlands College, who were holding a conference in the Uniplex, immediately pitched in to help, as did local Victim Services personnel. Social Services also arrived and began answering inquiries and registering the names of evacuees.

Zarazun was astonished and moved by the community's response and the innumerable volunteers.

"People just came off the street to help. ... We were not three communities, we were one community."

After the initial flood of evacuees had been fed and cared for, the word came in that it would be safe to go back around 10:30 p.m. Several children who had been separated from their parents stayed behind, as did the firefighters who were off shift. Volunteers provided three meals a day over the weekend, and also filled up the refreshment truck for the fire line.

"Nobody said no (to helping out)," Zarazun added. "There were so many people in the kitchen at one point, you couldn't move, because they were making hundreds and hundreds of sandwiches. It was just bizarre."

Not far away, Pre-Cam Elementary School was dealing with hundreds of frightened children and many of their anxious parents.

"I know a number of people (on staff) were very concerned about their own property, but they felt an obligation to stay with their kids," said principal Nelson Orthner. "They didn't really have a chance to go get them (their belongings) the way others did."

At the RCMP's request, the staff at Pre-Cam stayed with the children until 4 p.m. on Thursday afternoon, while five buses waited outside in case the school had to be evacuated. Despite their fears and stress, the staff also decided that school would go on on Friday.

"We felt it was important that the kids have a safe place (to go), especially those whose parents were out fighting the fire," Orthner said.

No matter who you talk to about the fire, there's one theme that repeats itself over and over: for every person who helped, there's someone else who helped them. From Hicks, thanks go to Cindy Hudy and the entire La Ronge RCMP detachment, Mayor Joe Hordyski, community development officer Angus Pratt and John Cook of the provincial fire centre. Zarazun counts among her heroes the reams of volunteers, notably from the Royal Purple and the Legion. Orthner offers his bouquet to Larry Lowenberg and La Ronge Bus Lines.

There are more — many more. They thank you for holding us together.

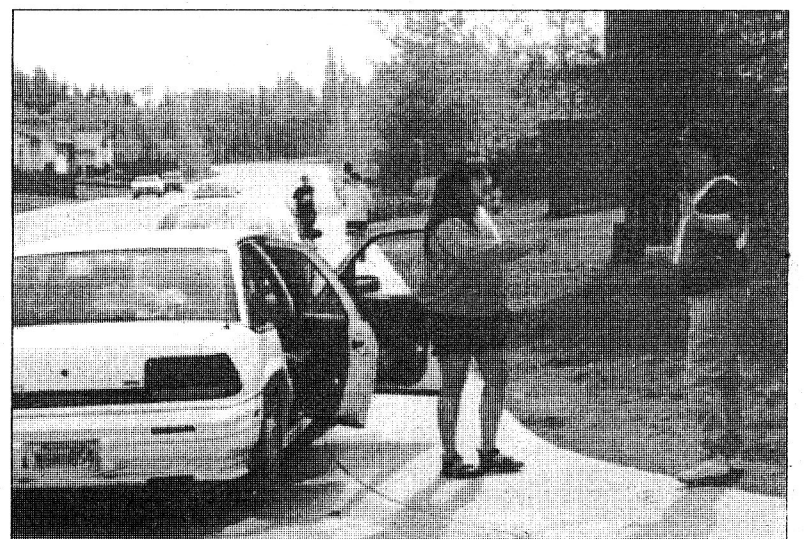
Carmen Pauls

Staff

"People just came off the street to help.... We were not three communities, we were one community."

— Laurie Zarazun

Top: Volunteers dragged miles of hose to sundry hotspots. Left: Local businesses, and fire departments from Lakeland and Buckland RMs, chipped in with their resources. Right: Vaughn Skogstad had to turn residents away from their homes on Riese Dr., which had been evacuated.



Photos by Pat Davidson