

Community Group of the Year Independence Civic Club

A model for any civic group under normal
circumstances, residents went above and beyond
to help their neighbors when disaster struck

By Darcy Ellis

There's sort of a running joke among members of the Independence Civic Club about which sign of the apocalypse will strike their small community next.

A sardonic sense of humor has become somewhat of a trademark here – this is the group, after all, responsible for the International Fruitcake Festival – and yet one can't help but wonder how much genuine concern underlies the mock-speculation about tornadoes, earthquakes, even locusts and plague.

After two consecutive summers that saw the Inyo Complex Fire bearing down on their town in the summer of 2007 and the Oak Creek flash flood and mud slide tearing a path of destruction through two dozen homes this past July, it's not hard to see why these men and women – who watched as their neighbors, family and friends lost everything they owned, who themselves suffered at the indiscriminate, merciless hand of Mother Nature – are a bit gun-shy.

Yet ask just about anyone familiar with not only the Independence Civic Club's recent humanitarian efforts but also its more routine community action endeavors and they'll no doubt say that regardless of what the gods have in store for the county seat tomorrow or 20 years from now, the Civic Club won't hesitate to be among the first to react.

Indeed, when the sky opened up at the base of the Sierra on July 12, relentlessly dumping an hour's worth of hail in mere minutes onto terrain left bare by the prior summer's fire, the Independence Civic Club responded almost immediately to the ensuing flash flood that devastated Oak Creek and Fort Independence.

Within 24 hours the group had established a relief fund at a local bank and its members – some of whom were personally displaced by the mud slide – were already scrambling to collect food, clothing and a place to stay for their newly homeless neighbors.

The club's efforts would only accelerate and expand over the following days and weeks, until it was able to start distributing to flood and mud slide victims the more than \$30,000 it had collected and raised on their behalf in less than two months.

It is for many reasons, but primarily their selfless response to the flood, their resilience in the face of adversity, belief in civic well-being and their testament to the power of solidarity, generosity and grass-roots spirit, that the members of the Independence Civic Club are being honored in 2008 with *The Inyo Register's* inaugural Community Group of the Year award.

The way the independent panel convened to select a recipient saw it, the group was really a no-brainer choice for the honor, considering its above-and-beyond flood relief efforts on top of the community improvement and civic endeavors it organizes on a regular basis.

Members of the Civic Club Executive Committee were nevertheless taken aback, citing the club's work as nothing any other community group wouldn't have done in the same circumstances.

That's not too say, however, that they aren't thrilled to be recognized.

"I am stunned," said Civic Club President Nancy Masters. "I'm surprised because what we did is what anyone would have done, and receiving an honor is not why we organized these relief efforts. But I feel very honored that our organization was selected."

The club's secretary and Masters' sister, Mary Roper, echoed those sentiments.

"It's unbelievable," she said. "You never expect recognition and that's certainly not why you do all this stuff. I'm flattered. There are a lot of community groups in Inyo County who do a lot for their communities, so it's really an honor to be singled out."

Just before 6 p.m. on Saturday, July 12, Jim Bilyeu, longtime Independence resident and the area's representative on the Inyo County Board of Supervisors, was approaching the four-lane section of U.S. 395 between Oak Creek and Fort Independence from the north when a torrent of mud and water and debris shot across the highway in front of his car.

He and his passengers looked west, far, far up the hillside, to the base of the Sierra where the usually docile Oak Creek was now a beast unleashed.

From the backseat came Keith Bright's voice: "Well, there goes my ranch."

And he was right.

In addition to obliterating the historic Bright Ranch, located in a small valley at 5,000 feet, the flood and mud slide destroyed 25 homes in Oak Creek, numerous vehicles and outbuildings and caused millions of dollars in damage to the historic Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery.

It was all destruction that Masters and Roper saw first-hand on July 13 as they hiked into the remains of their family's ranch to try and retrieve their father Keith's prescription medicine from the flotsam and jetsam that had once been their home.

The scene, Masters said, was one of "total and complete devastation." Their father's mobile home wasn't missing as first thought; it was just now in a million or so pieces.

"When I saw the ranch and I saw the damage, I thought, 'There's no way anything is going to be left below here,'" Roper said.

Up high, the flood waters had carved trenches 60 feet deep in some places. Farther below along Oak Creek, gigantic boulders, carried by the flood waters like pine cones, were strewn about, some deposited in garages and living rooms where the mud was knee- and sometimes waist-deep. Uprooted trees and massive branches formed twisted, surrealist art installations across brand-new rock fields. Trucks and other vehicles were marooned in streambeds thousands of yards from their driveways and a few mobile homes and trailers were wrapped around trees. The damage was as extensive as it was frightening – the Sheriff's Department would later say it was a miracle no one was killed.

As the sisters walked down the mountainside to the highway surveying the destruction, the conversation turned to the topic it so often does when someone's in need in Independence.

"All we were talking about was, 'How are we going to help these folks?'" Roper said.

By the start of business on Monday, July 14, Civic Club members had already established a relief fund at El Dorado Savings Bank in Lone Pine.

"The word went out and donations began to pour in as the Civic Club collected names and found the whereabouts of the victims," recalled Independence resident and county Auditor-Controller Leslie Chapman, who was later assigned to the committee responsible for distributing the relief funds along with Jim Strouh, a retired geology professor, Joel Hampton, superintendent of Owens Valley Unified School District, and Victoria Livermont, an Independence native and Business and Political Science major at Whittier College.

Actually, the donations didn't so much as pour in as they arrived in a constant deluge that almost rivaled the flood in its intensity.

According to Chapman, "several generous donations" came in from community-based organizations, while individuals and families – some with close ties to the Independence area and others who had never heard of Oak Creek until seeing the flood images on the nightly news – began mailing in donations from their homes across the Eastern Sierra and the country, from as far away as New York.

"People were so generous to their friends and neighbors," Roper said, "and we got an incredible response from people out of the area. It kind of humbles you."

As donations large and small came in, the Civic Club contacted the Salvation Army so it could set up a "storefront" in town where flood victims could access basic necessities such as clothing and, later, household goods and even furniture and appliances.

Those goods would be utilized by the displaced residents lucky enough to find temporary and even permanent housing, again with the assistance of the Civic Club, which undertook a rental coordination effort and posted a master list of available houses and apartments..

During this time, the Civic Club coordinated its efforts with those of the Red Cross. to ensure everyone who needed food, clothing or shelter received aid.

By the second week in August, Chapman said, flood victims began receiving the first round of funding from the relief fund, which had been bolstered by a fundraising barbecue that brought in \$3,927 and a juice and snack sale on the courthouse lawn that raised \$1,840.

The latter fundraiser was an impromptu benefit staged by two preteens inspired by the philanthropy around them – Hayden Stamy, a native of London who had been visiting her godmother, Civic Club member and Oak Creek resident Claiborne Mitchell, when the flood and mud slide struck, and Noa Mine Lush.

According to Chapman, the Civic Club distributed \$11,750 during that first round, \$650 for every "head of household" affected and \$200 for each additional person.

"The second round was more needs based," she said. "People were asked to fill out a form listing their losses and to prioritize them based on importance. Of course, the losses were staggering."

The committee distributed \$18,250 mostly based, Chapman explained, on immediate needs such as food, clothing and daily living necessities.

And not everyone was forthcoming – at all or about the full extent of their need, perhaps because they didn't want to appear greedy, or were too proud to accept charity or felt someone could use the money more than they could.

"Many of the homeowners declined the offer by donating their share back to the pot for redistribution," Chapman said, while "landlords were more concerned about their tenants than about themselves and donated back their shares."

And this is where many have applauded the fact that the Civic Club was so deeply involved in the distribution of the relief funds. Independence being such a small town, club members knew who had needs and had a pretty good idea of what they were – so flood victims who failed to apply for relief funds for whatever reason found themselves with an appropriate level of financial aid anyway.

And they got it quickly. The committee began distributing the second round of funding by Sept. 1 – about seven weeks after the flood.

The goal, Chapman explained, was to get assistance to the flood victims “right away” so they could concentrate on not only piecing their lives back together, but obtaining more substantial assistance from the state and federal government.

Bilyeu, the Fourth District Inyo County supervisor and a former longtime law enforcement officer, is certainly no stranger to the pitfalls of bureaucracy.

He is among the many who laud the Civic Club for handling the relief fund distribution and for doing it so expeditiously.

“I think this was extraordinary on their behalf to do this,” he said.

When not spearheading relief efforts in response to natural disasters, members of the Independence Civic Club – roughly 90 in all – are busy helping to ensure their town is the type of place one would expect to find the county seat.

That is to say, they organize and assist with events and projects that make Independence a place where there’s plenty to do and see year-round, a place that’s populated with men and women and families knowledgeable of their area’s unique history and the current events and issues affecting their county and neighborhoods.

It’s all part of the club’s mission statement of sorts, which dictates that it be “a public forum for civic action.”

According to Masters, the simple, five-word phrase has guided the Civic Club in all its endeavors since its inception in 1956, back when its membership was comprised solely of men and the women of Independence poured their philanthropic and civic energies into the Garden Club.

But the genesis of the Civic Club, Masters said, can be traced back to the Independence Business and Professional Men’s Club, which as far as her research has been able to determine was established in December of 1933.

Almost 75 years later, the name has changed and the membership is far more diverse and inclusive, but the club of today shares with its forebear the same pride in community and desire to affect improvement wherever possible.

Today the club hosts a number of public forums, as a regular part of its monthly meetings and when the need arises because of pressing community or county issues, such as elections or proposed water rate increases.

The club hosted a well-attended candidates' night prior to the June primary, threw a party back in April to welcome the employees of Skanska Construction Company to town and is planning to welcome Judge Dean Stout at an upcoming meeting to discuss the current state of the local legal system and plans for a new justice center in Independence.

Arlene Grider, a former president of the Civic Club, longtime member and retired county official, explained that the best part about the club just may be its normal, every-day function as a community resource for information and social stimulus.

“What’s great about the Civic Club is all community members are welcome,” she said. “The monthly meetings are social and news gathering. At the potluck supper new residents are introduced and catch up on what’s happening with the old timers. The short business meeting or program updates the community about what is happening in Independence and throughout the county. As with any group there is always the opportunity to volunteer for one of their projects or events.”

On an annual basis, the Independence Civic Club is responsible for three major events in the county seat: the Fourth of July Celebration, aforementioned Fruitcake Festival and Christmas Eve at the Courthouse, which features Santa’s reindeer on the roof of the 1869 building and Santa himself handing out presents to the town’s children.

The Independence Day festivities are by far the biggest to take place in the county seat each year, and not only do they help solidify Independence’s reputation as a family-friendly locale with a down-home spirit, they bring virtually the entire town – and plenty of visitors – together for two days of carefree merriment.

Then again, half the town is already helping to put the July 4 events together, from organizing the annual parade to preparing the food for the barbecue to staging the post-dusk pyrotechnics display.

“That’s a lot of energy every summer,” said Masters, “but it’s so much fun to do.”

And after dwelling in the aftermath of disaster for so long, fun is exactly what the Civic Club is looking forward to this winter with the Dec. 13 return of its International Fruitcake Festival – an event now in its fourth year that has gained the attention of the national media (NPR and gourmet food magazines among them) and fruitcake fans around the globe (they do exist, it turns out).

The festival, an outrageous celebration that manages to be both mocking and sincere in its reverence to the world’s most hated baked good, began as almost a joke kicked around between the Bright sisters. Jon Klusmire, then a reporter for *The Inyo Register*, heard about the idea and several tongue-in-cheek articles later, the festival is now as much a staple of Independence as the fruitcake is the holiday season.

As a “thank you” for his efforts, the Civic Club crowned Klusmire the Fruitcake King in perpetuity. The Civic Club has been mum on what plans it has in store for the king this year to tie in to the festival’s “extraterrestrial/outerspace” theme.

Aside from serving as their festival’s reigning king, Klusmire, now the county museum services director, is also one of the Civic Club’s biggest fans.

“The Civic Club is really a classic small-town organization. If there isn’t anything to do, they don’t invent stuff; when there is something to do, whether it’s the Fourth of July or helping a neighbor, they come to life, get everyone in town involved, get the job done and then insist on taking no credit or publicity,” Klusmire said. “The fire and flood have put the Civic Club in the spotlight, but the club members do many things that don’t ever get noticed outside the community. For example, an Independence man was recently injured in a car wreck and hospitalized in another state where he had to stay for several months. Members of the Civic Club, Lions Club and Chamber of Commerce made sure everyone in town knew how to reach him in the hospital; they then figured out who would

take care of his home, lawn and his pets; and will probably help get him home and continue to help out until he is able to do those routine chores. That is an example of a small town functioning as a real, caring community where everyone's neighbor is also their friend when in need.

"The group loves the traditions that make Independence unique, like having Santa's 'reindeer' on the courthouse roof during Christmas or the Fourth of July Barbeque, and they are bound and determined to help keep those traditions alive," Klusmire continued. "Killing the Fruitcake Festival wouldn't tear me up, but then again, they don't get to get dressed up very often in Independence, so what the heck."

The list of the Civic Club's accomplishments, good deeds and attributes could well go on and on; but all that's been said begs the question: how do these people find the time to do so much?

"We are always running, all the time," Masters said. "We just make it happen. There's a group of us that e-mails each other every morning with tasks to do that day and we do it."

"It's true," Roper conceded, laughing, shaking her head.

According to Masters, the beauty of the Civic Club is in the makeup of its membership – a combination of visionaries and "doers" – which allows such a relatively small group of people to accomplish so much given relatively scant resources.

Having the conviction and passion of a group three times its size doesn't hurt, either. Nor does the fact, Masters pointed out, that each and every member is so unique, that the club, and by extension its events and the townspeople, are able to benefit from many different kinds of expertise and points of view.

So what about the most important question of all? – Why does the Civic Club takes the time to do what it does, for neighbors and strangers alike?

"Because it's a way to build a stronger community," Masters said, "and ... well, I'm just going to leave it at that."