

EMERGENCY



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Helping others

There is value in altruism; there is strength in the moral principle of helping the less fortunate without expecting compensation.

What would make self-employed and retired persons, lawyers, engineers, security guards, first aid instructors, mechanics, managers, sales executives, labourers, school teachers, graphic artists, pastors, and people of different faiths and social and economic backgrounds give up their free time to work as a volunteer group of emergency responders?

Why would this group want to help? Who is this group who wear the bright orange shirts with numbers emblazoned across the back performing acts of random kindness? What drives them to be a part of the organisation where their rewards come not from the membership, but from "John Q. Public" who says thanks for their efforts?

Twenty years ago, after spending four months in India, Ismail Patel, a Muslim, had the answers to these questions hammered home following the annual monsoon rains, which left devastation across hundreds of miles of square area, villages under water, lives lost, properties destroyed and livestock swept away, and human suffering seen in the eyes of the survivors.

Patel watched as Hindus and Muslims cast aside their long held differences to help those in need – roads cleared; food and drinking water distributed; shelters erected for the homeless; the injured were cared for and the dead buried according to their religion. Patel returned to Barbados with memories of the community's response to the monsoon's devastation with an idea that would soon become a reality.

He approach Mohamed Ali Kothdiwala with his idea and the Department of Emergency Management, then called CERO with a concept of volunteer response at the community level. Patel said that at first, the response was lukewarm but he persevered and shared the concept with friends Denis Lashley, Jefferson Bovell, Yousuf Bulbulia, Yousuf Dokrat, Mohammed Bhana and Sheldon Walker.

This group would become the core on which voluntarism would reach another level, and in 1993, the Roving Response Team was born. Two years later, 1995, Patel registered the group as a charitable structured volunteer organisation under the Barbados Charities Act. Their mission was simple – "help anyone, anywhere, anytime there was a need. Ask nothing in return, and move on to the next task".

In the years that followed, funded entirely by themselves,

the group grew as their efforts attracted others who shared their vision and altruistic beliefs. Their efforts also attracted the attention of the private sector whose financial donations allowed them to purchase specialised equipment, including chainsaws, ropes, radios, and other personal protective equipment. Their activities also gained the attention of the Barbados Government and in 2008 received their first government subvention to support their continued activities.

An expanded membership brought new skills into the organisation, engineering, mechanics, fire-fighting and hazardous materials response, advanced first aid and medical response, high angle rescue and building collapse response, flooding and natural hazards reaction.

Each new skill in the organisation has increased its competence and confidence, whose members spend many of their weekends training and improving their response times and quality of service. However with 40 persons on board and many more applying for membership, their mission after 20 years remains unchanged.

Patel says that it is was never his intention to create a large unmanageable entity, but one that would be efficient, responsible and committed to serving any community regardless of class or religious belief, but one that would work in harmony with the established emergency services of Barbados, thereby increasing the country's ability to emergency relief when there was a need. A goal he feels is accomplished every time they respond.

They come from all walks of life, bringing with them years of experience and training that becomes critical to the organisation's ability to be effective in a community. And while some of them may have joined initially for the "prestige of association", that very narrow viewed changed the first time they were in the field, and the emotion of "good feeling of self", now drives their every response.

The Roving Response Team has become a 24 hour organisation, responding not only to natural hazards, but to traffic accidents, highway oil spills that requires immediate clean-up, fires and as support to medical emergencies. The team lent support to the Arch Cot Building collapse. They can be seen at every major event in the island, from Crop-Over Festival to Agrofest.

They have grown from a hodgepodge of unskilled volunteers, supported only by their families, to an organisation that continues to improve in technical skill and managerial discipline vital to any first responder organisation, which has earned the respect of the communities which they strive to serve, the Government's established emergency services and the private sector.

There are many sides to voluntarism. It is a subject that, like so many others, is not often give forefront status until something happens, or the actions of one individual is highlighted in the media. Volunteers are unfortunately not given the type of preeminence that they rightfully deserved,

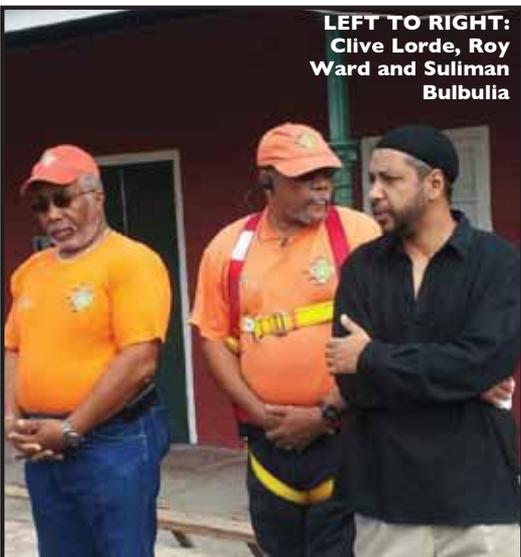


LEFT TO RIGHT: Mohammed Bhana, Harcourt Hinkson, Clyde Cox, Yousuf Dokrat.

due in some cases to the "not-so-good" actions of others.

The members of the Roving Response Team are not paid for their service and they never will be, for they are volunteers. Their commitment to community service supports a belief held by many that voluntarism is not dead and that there is a significant difference between community spiritedness and volunteering.

They believe that the collective thoughts of people who live in an impacted area will generate positive community spiritedness. In their opinion, every community once faced with a common problem or issue, will see it as their collective responsibility as members of that community to help where ever and whoever needs that one moment of kindness and care. They are one team serving many.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Clive Lorde, Roy Ward and Suliman Bulbulia



Ismail Patel