

# DIARY OF A DISASTER

On 22 February the big Christchurch quake stole lives, livelihoods and residents' peace of mind. Here local journalist Amanda Cropp chronicles the day-to-day challenges facing her family, suburb and city post-quake and marvels at the resilience of people determined to overcome what nature has hurled at them. Again. This is her diary.

PHOTOGRAPHY: AMANDA CROPP AND THIS PAGE, GETTY IMAGES.

## DAY ONE:

*Tuesday 22 Feb, 12.51pm*

The whole family is home and finishing lunch when it feels as if the house has turned into one of those vibrating paint mixer machines used in hardware stores. The vicious shaking lasts about 15 seconds, much shorter than the 4 September quake, but far more damaging.

Last time we got away with a few broken ornaments, cracked plaster and two wobbly chimneys that were later removed by a builder. This time with the epicentre just over the hill in Lyttelton it's a different story.

Bottles of wine rain down off the top of the pantry which spews its contents over the kitchen floor creating an unappetising mix of broken glass, brown sugar, wine, rice, dried fruit and paprika. The side-by-side fridge and freezer units, so heavy it usually takes two of us to shift them, are shunted out of their alcove.

Metre-high pots on the deck topple over and a huge cloud of dust rises from the base of the cliffs along Wakefield Avenue in Sumner village.

Every room in the house is trashed but after the last big quake I'd invested in a pot of museum-grade quake wax to glue down my precious hand-blown glass and most of it survives.

Power and water are off, and despite patchy landline and cellphone coverage we manage to contact friends and relations around the country to let them know we are okay. Without access to TV or the internet it feels like we're living in a bubble and they know more about what is going on than we do.

My tiny battery-operated radio in the kitchen window sill brings only bad news; unlike the 4am September quake, there have been many deaths.

I'm not a religious person but I thank God a lot today. Thank God my husband Mark was not riding his Vespa to work through the central city. Thank God a teachers' union meeting meant he'd picked up our sons Ben, 16, and Nic, 14, and our 17-year-old French exchange student Martin at midday. Thank God the boys decided to get changed and have lunch here instead of heading into town on the number 3 Sumner bus which was crushed by falling masonry.

After cleaning up we walk down to Sumner village feeling slightly shell-shocked and discover the source of the dust cloud. A house-sized rock has landed on a building beside the RSA Community Club and word on the street is that two workmen were killed by a rock fall on a neighbouring building site. Three elderly ladies from an apartment building set up deckchairs on the footpath and sit out the aftershocks wrapped in duvets.

At the beach great chunks have fallen off local landmark Cave Rock. Even more spectacular is the damage to the once towering Shag Rock which has been shaken apart leaving chunks of cube-shaped boulders



*My office was trashed.*

*My youngest son Nic in our dining room looking at the mess on the floor, which is the contents of our pantry.*

strewn around the base like pieces of Lego.

Henceforth it will be known as "Shag Pile".

Dinner is spaghetti heated on a gas cooker in the garage, served on white bread on plastic plates to save washing dishes. The lemon trees become the male urinal and I use our en suite operating on the "if it's yellow let it mellow" principle. We go to bed soon after it gets dark, but jarring aftershocks all night long keep us awake.

## DAY TWO: *Wednesday 23 Feb*

At 6am I dig a latrine between the olive trees and when Ben complains about pooing in the garden I tell him to get over it and pretend he is a cat.

As a news junkie I'm grateful to receive a copy of the Press newspaper and sit up in bed crying as I get my first look at the terrible damage in the CBD.

During his years in the RNZAF Mark regularly flew disaster relief missions around the Pacific taking aid to cyclone victims. In more than 30 years as a journalist I've covered the aftermath of a few natural disasters, including Hurricane Andrew in the US and the last earthquake here, but now we're struggling to come to terms with being in the middle of our own disaster.

Mark and the boys drive to Redcliffs School and queue for five hours to get water. It has to be boiled for three minutes before drinking, cooking or washing dishes so I label bottles of "treated" water with white stickers to avoid an outbreak of diarrhoea.

## DAY THREE: *Thursday 24 Feb*

We set off for Prebbleton where friends are offering showers and washing facilities to earthquake refugees. ►



On 7 March we finally got water back on, but until then we relied on water runs to the school night and morning, bottled water and the kindness of friends and family who allowed us to visit for showers, washing and a "fill up".



Me, taking it all in.



My husband Mark filling up our water containers.

Almost the entire commercial area of Sumner village is cordoned off; cracks in the brickwork of the former Sumner Borough Council building that houses our local museum and community centre have widened in the aftershocks and demolition seems inevitable. The roads are riddled with fissures and it is especially nerve-wracking driving past the high cliffs beside the Peacocks Gallop reserve where the volcanic rock has crumbled like chocolate cake and there are ominous looking cracks.

In the houses above us large picture windows hang at drunken angles, daylight is visible between the tiles on the roofs and a spa pool teeters on the edge of a precipice.

Ferry Road is a roller-coaster of humps and hollows, one of which has swallowed a gondola shuttle bus advertising 360-degree views.

It's strange seeing uniformed army personnel in light armoured vehicles on city streets but across town it's like the earthquake never happened and it is such a relief to walk into a house with power and running water.

At the Lincoln supermarket flour, milk, pasta and rice are rationed. I stock up on tampons thinking that this would be a very good time for menopause to strike and I feel quite decadent buying some moisturiser (I've just run out) and pavlova (so Martin can try our national dessert).

We borrow a generator to keep the fridge and freezer going. Although the noise is a minor inconvenience – the boys barbecue dinner wearing ear muffs – we feel lucky and share our good fortune by throwing an extension cord over the fence to one set of neighbours, and wheeling the generator over to another once our fridge is cold.

The death toll so far is 75, hundreds more are missing and Mark is upset to learn one of his air traffic controller colleagues was killed in the city mall. But good wishes from friends near and far boost morale. When I checked my emails in Prebbleton there was a Facebook message from Bahrain from the guy who introduced Mark and me on a blind date, and a tweet from a journalist I worked with in Florida in the early 1990s. One of Mark's long-lost brothers calls from Australia, and an old friend who usually keeps in touch via Christmas cards phones and we talk for the first time in 25 years.

Two minutes after I come off air from an interview with National Radio a woman I wrote a story about for a food magazine rings up offering two spare bedrooms if we need them. Just as I'm drifting off to sleep Israeli TV calls wanting me to do "live stand ups" about the earthquake. I tell the woman I have other priorities, but I can't sleep and spend most of the night listening to earthquake coverage on my ancient Walkman.

#### DAY FOUR: Friday 25 Feb

The constant thunder of Iroquois helicopters doing aerial surveys of the damage makes our normally quiet seaside village sound like a war zone or an episode from *M\*A\*S\*H*. Washing laundry by hand makes me feel as if I'm starring in my own reality TV show about pioneer life and I'd kill for a mangle to wring out the clothes. We manage clean undies every day but make T-shirts last two or three, hoping deodorant will disguise the pong.

After dinner we go for a walk and are amazed there were not more deaths and injuries caused by falling boulders, some the size of armchairs, that have crashed into houses and gardens. Spotting lights on in houses we suffer a severe case of electricity envy and it's even more frustrating to arrive home in the dark to find the street light outside our house glowing brightly, but inside we are still irritatingly power-less.

#### DAY FIVE: Saturday 26 Feb

Another home-stay family offers to take Martin to Nelson for a few days and we drive though earthquake ravaged eastern Christchurch to drop him off.

Road conditions in Aranui are appalling and a handwritten sign begs motorists to "slow the f\*\*\* down", an indication of the intense frustration of a poor community that already had little and now has even less.

We're forced to detour because there is so much "liquifudge" – a sloppy, disgusting mix of sand, water and sewage caused by liquifaction. The first big quake produced 30,000 tonnes, this time the estimate is at least

200,000 tonnes. An EQC building inspector puts our minds at rest about cracked plaster on our internal chimney stacks. He is confident the cracks are superficial and the bricks behind will not collapse, but as a precautionary measure we move Ben's bed so his head is well away from the chimney breast.

Shortly after lunch the power comes back on. The sons are ecstatic because it means they can watch *Top Gear* on TV. I'm ecstatic because I can use the stove instead of crouching over a camping cooker in the garage. We're all ecstatic that the hole in the garden can be filled in because portalooos have been dropped off 20 metres from our front gate. They soon get a makeover. One has three gnomes lined up outside, a painting hanging on the fence, a toilet bowl "vase" filled with flowers, a table, chair and magazines. The red loo across the road has a Marilyn Monroe poster on the door, deckchairs to relax in while you wait and power points to recharge cellphones.

Tonight I have a sponge bath, wash my hair, clearfell the forest on my calves and irrigate the cherry tomatoes using just four litres of water. A dollop of Van Cleef & Arpels shower gel, a gift from Martin's mum, makes me feel a million dollars. I realise it is days since I bothered with make-up – a record for a woman who rarely leaves the house without lipstick.

#### DAY SIX: Sunday 27 Feb

There has been a major exodus of residents and houses all around us are empty but we've decided to stay together as a family and tough this out. Some families are enrolling their children in schools as far afield as Auckland and Wanaka, but it would take the boys at least a term to settle in and make new friends, and we feel better being together. Many of the teens who normally fill the local supermarket roster have left town so Ben, who already works there part-time, recruits his brother and some of his mates to clean and restock the shelves. With two other nearby supermarkets closed indefinitely it's a much-needed community service.

Today I ring the Fire Service about our one remaining chimney which has developed a worrying crack. Five minutes later the local volunteer brigade arrives and within half an hour the chimney is down and the hole capped with a tarpaulin.

#### DAY SEVEN: Monday 28 Feb

The main road out of Sumner has been closed because of concern about the cliff faces which means the only way out is via the Summit Road. Given the risk of being taken out by falling boulders dislodged by aftershocks, I'd be wary of going that way, so we are effectively cut off.

At 12.30pm there's a residents' meeting at Sumner School and police tell us geotechnical experts are monitoring cracks near evacuated clifftop homes. At the 5pm community meeting a loud cheer erupts



Tent classrooms erected at Sumner School.

The boys' school was damaged and they now have a 50km round trip to a shared college, with lessons from 1.15pm to 6pm.



My eldest son Ben (in the blue T-shirt) taking part in a maths lesson in a tent classroom.

from the crowd when police announce the main road is reopening. There's concern about the possibility of looting but the spokesman says the contingent of Aussie cops is a fearsome bunch. "They've caught more burglars than we have and if their rugby team was as good as their police, we'd have something to worry about."

Tucked away in the curve of Banks Peninsula 12km from the central city, Sumner has always been a tight-knit community and people are pulling together.

The old school hall is now a community hub providing information, bottled water, hand sanitiser and the chance to catch up with other residents. A maths teacher has volunteered to provide classes for senior students, there are movie nights for youngsters, and until formal lessons resume, activities for kids will run three days a week in tents erected in the school grounds.

There's a community laundry set up in a garage across the road. A couple with solar water heating are offering free hot showers (bring your own bucket of water) and yesterday they put through 50 people including the residents of a nearby resthome.



## DAY EIGHT: Tuesday 1 Mar

Today at 12.51pm, exactly a week since the quake struck, the entire country observes a two-minute silence to honour the dead. In my parents' Rangiora living room Mark and I hug each other, weeping openly we watch the scenes of ruin on TV.

Seeing the remains of Christ Church Cathedral is unbearably sad. At high school I'd done bell ringing there, climbing the spiral stairs every Tuesday night to practise. The tower swayed alarmingly when all the bells were tolling and I can't begin to image what it would have been like during the quake.

At home we discover 15 two-litre bottles of water on the deck, a gift from some of Mark's workmates. A couple of nights ago rural volunteer members of the Farmy Army knocked on our front door offering fresh water from a tanker on a trailer. Such small kindnesses keep us going.

## DAY NINE: Wednesday 2 Mar

This morning at the community hub I'm chatting to the school principal when two volunteers bowl up to show us how they've been teaching kids about hygiene by making "poo" out of chocolate cake mix squeezed through a pair of panty hose (intestines). It was a great hit with the boys apparently.

In the sweltering heat it is torture hearing the surf but knowing we can't swim in it because the city's sewers are emptying into the sea.

The school swimming pool is off limits too because it hasn't been chlorinated and the water will be needed by the fire brigade in the event of a fire, so we make do with all-over washes in a plastic bin.

Unfortunately my cherry tomatoes are dying; they clearly don't appreciate water laced with posh French shower gel.



Decorated portaloos on our street, with (almost) all the comforts of home!

## DAY TEN: Thursday 3 Mar

There are seven aftershocks overnight and I lie in bed wondering how much more of a battering our 120-year-old villa can take.

Aftershocks heralded by an awful rumbling tend to be milder and the sudden jolts that come out of nowhere are much worse; it's like being shoved violently by a school bully who has sneaked up from behind.

More bad news today: 160 confirmed dead, one third of buildings in the CBD face demolition and rebuilding Christchurch is estimated to take 15 years. The search for survivors is officially called off and the rescue mission turns into a recovery effort, a terrible blow for families missing loved ones.

So far seven people who lived or worked in Sumner have died in the quake, including two members of the Sumner Lifeboat rescue crew.

## DAY ELEVEN: Friday 4 Mar

This morning Ben has a maths tutorial in a tent at Sumner School and Nic spends the morning teaching maths to a friend's 10 year-old son. I give Martin an English lesson on how to describe the earthquake when he returns to his lycée in Bourges next week. He learns a new word: rubble.

This afternoon I volunteer on the info desk at the community hub. There's great excitement because water has been spotted in Sumner, most of it leaking out of the pavement rather than running from taps, but it's a good sign. A local gas fitter has rigged up hot showers in the school pool changing rooms and I take advantage of his handiwork. I don't have any clean knickers with me so I put the old ones on inside out. Needs must.

## DAY TWELVE: Saturday 5 Mar

For a break we visit Westfield Mall where the boys mainline on McDonald's. They tease me mercilessly when I refuse to use the multi-storey parking building until I point out that if there's an emergency evacuation following a big aftershock, we could be marooned for hours. We park on the street.

Martin is chuffed when we buy him an "I survived the Christchurch earthquake" T-shirt to recognise his bravery in the face of adversity. How this French boy who had never before experienced an earthquake remains so calm is beyond me. We take him to visit Deans Bush, a normally peaceful patch of native forest in the middle of Christchurch, but the sound of helicopters and wailing sirens is a reminder of the continuing inner-city chaos.

Tonight at 7.30pm there is a 4.8 aftershock followed by several smaller tremors and they really freak me out. I'm well over this shaking business!

## DAY THIRTEEN: Sunday 6 Mar

We spend the day in Hanmer Springs climbing Conical Hill and relaxing in the hot pools. Half of Christchurch seems to have shifted here and I'm sure all of us would like to stay, except this town too is on a fault line and is no stranger to earthquakes.

## DAY FOURTEEN: Monday 7 Mar

We farewell Martin and his classmates from Lycée Marguerite de Navarre at the airport. Despite their ordeal the students are reluctant to leave and line up holding pieces of paper which they turn over to spell out, "We will see you again very soon!" Given half a chance I'd squeeze myself into someone's hand luggage and escape to Paris.

## DAY FIFTEEN: Tuesday 8 Mar

We have running water at last and for the first time in a fortnight I shower at home. Life is falling back into a routine – the new normal – with Nic and Ben doing schoolwork in the mornings, going online to collect assignments. Their school, Shirley Boys' High, was badly damaged and will be closed for at least a year for rebuilding. In the interim students will share the campus at Papanui High School, a 50km round trip, with classes starting at 1.15pm and finishing at 6pm. It will be a big adjustment but we'll make it work. At least we have a home – according to the news tonight 10,000 Christchurch houses face demolition.

On a more positive note Urban Search and Rescue personnel and members of the volunteer fire brigade have retrieved precious historical items from the crumbling Sumner Museum by crawling through a metal pipe used to protect workers searching for bodies at Christ Church Cathedral (where mercifully none were found).

## DAY SIXTEEN: Wednesday 9 Mar

I watch video footage of the quake aftermath on YouTube, barely recognising some parts of the CBD, and I keep thinking that the images in front of me belong in another country ... Haiti perhaps.

## DAY SEVENTEEN: Thursday 10 Mar

When I visit my local hairdresser for a trim, she describes seeing white objects bouncing down the valley hillsides along with the boulders, and realising they were live sheep. One of her best friends was killed in the High Street food court and between us we work out that nine people who lived or worked in Sumner have died, including four on the number 3 bus.

Identification is a painstaking process and another friend ended up taking police to the home of a deceased



The boys in front of Shag Rock, the once towering landmark we now call "Shag Pile".



Nic and Martin barbecue dinner wearing ear defenders to block out the noise of the generator.

A friend lent us a generator to keep the fridge and freezer going. We threw an extension cord over the fence so our neighbour could plug in and also wheeled the generator across the road so another family could use it too.

couple in the hope of retrieving their fingerprints off a can of pet food in their fridge.

## DAY EIGHTEEN: Friday 11 Mar

News breaks of the horrific quake and tsunami in Japan and it puts our situation in perspective. Thank God the tsunami warning issued for parts of New Zealand doesn't apply to us.

## DAY TWENTY: Sunday 13 Mar

The Ruptured Duck pizzeria was reduced to a pile of rubble overnight. The community centre is now screened from the road by shipping containers, its fate uncertain, and with other buildings also threatened, our village may end up looking like a gap-toothed mouth.

I discover one of the firemen who removed our damaged chimney is the owner of Rockvilla, a lovely old stone house that is now uninhabitable. On the gate, his family has left a farewell note that reads, "Buildings don't make good times, they don't make families and they don't make communities, people do and we live in an awesome community. Go Sumner, Go Christchurch, Go Canterbury. Thank you New Zealand."

I couldn't put it better. ■