



# EFMP Exceptional Family Member Program

## Resilience: Living Through a Natural Disaster

by Sandra Wallen, NASWI Fleet & Family EFMP Case Liaison

When traveling through the airport do you ever see those families loaded down with what looks like all their worldly possessions and think to yourself, man that will never be me?

Yep, that was me too once upon a time. Fast forward 16 years and 2 kids later and here we sit getting ready for yet another PCS across the ocean, this time returning back to the US after having been stationed in Okinawa for the last 5 years.

It's March 11, 2011, I have been filled with nervous energy all night but this is the norm when getting ready to uproot your life right? As we wait for our shuttle to arrive which will take us to the airport, our friends stopped by to say their final goodbyes. Of course the first thing out of all their mouths is the sarcastic shock that I can't go anywhere without over packing. It's always been an inside joke that if you are in need of something I probably have it in my bag. As we all giggle about the amount of luggage we are trekking across the globe I explained that some of the bags are necessary due to our youngest medical condition and the need to have all her medical documents with us. I also explain to them that when we PCS we always hand carry our important documents with us because we don't want them to get lost in the move.

Upon giving our last hugs and saying our last farewells I hand a note to my friend with my grandmother's phone number on it. She smiles, why do I need this? Oh you know, just in case you ever need to reach me in an emergency and can't get a hold of me for some reason, I tell her. Giving her one last squeeze we pile into the shuttle with our 8 pieces of luggage, 4 backpacks and 2 carry-ons and are off to the airport for our final flight back to the US.

Check in at the airport is seamless and we push on through security with no problem. Boarding begins for our plane and we take off...sayonara Okinawa.

Once we arrive in Narita we have to pick up our bags again and recheck them in. So we grab 2 trolleys and place a backpack harness on our 3 year old, hand the reins to our 7 year old and tell him to hang on to his sister while we organize the bags and recheck them in. At this point I think we look like a circus with all these bags, a kid on a leash, the older brother dragging her through the terminal but no, we just look like every other military family moving across the world. Loaded down, yes, but a well-oiled machine of chaos. We are doing what has to be done to ensure our luggage is checked in and the kids are safe and with us.

Once everything is checked in we decide to treat ourselves to one last trip to McDonald's in Japan...We spend the last on our Yen on drinks and use the restroom before needing to go through security again.

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[www.ready.gov/disabilities](http://www.ready.gov/disabilities)



## EFMP Case Liaisons

We are continuing to build our EFMP team at the installations!

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For the start of a new school year, here are some educational opportunities for you!

- ◆ IEP and 504 support through PAVE and your School Liaisons
- ◆ Kitsap County Parent Coalition
- ◆ EasterSeals offers workshops focusing on Autism the 3rd Tuesday of the month, in person at the Silverdale Library 3650 NW Anderson Hill Rd or virtually on zoom. For the zoom link and more information, email [Melia.Hughes@kcpc.wa.easterseals.com](mailto:Melia.Hughes@kcpc.wa.easterseals.com)
- ◆ Fun spooky science activities for the family to enjoy the 31 days in Oct with National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association <https://www.noaa.gov/education/multimedia/photos-images/celebrate-halloween-with-31-days-of-noaa-spooky-science>



## RESOURCES

Check out our New Navy Region Northwest EFMP Community Guide. We feature many of our on and off base partners as well as services in areas by installation. It also serves as goal areas Fleet and Family EFMP Case Liaisons may support you with coordinating.

### FLEET & FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAM EXCEPTIONAL FAMILY MEMBER PROGRAM



Scan here for  
Benefits & Services -  
Military, Federal,  
State & Local



Visit the site to connect with your NRNW installation's case liaison  
<https://community.apan.org/wg/exceptional-family-member-program/>

## SIGN LANGUAGE

We are excited to launch **free** Sign Language classes at NBK Fleet and Family in Oct. You may register with Fleet & Family Centralized Scheduling 1-800-562-3301. In the near future, we intend to bring them online.

### Early Developmental Sign Language Workshop for Parents 90 Minute Class/once a quarter

This 90-minute class provides parents with an overview of basic signs that are most helpful to parents with non-verbal children or infants. It will touch on the importance of signing during the early childhood development stage. The class will highlight basic "How Tos" for teaching children and babies to sign, along with vocabulary focusing on themes like mealtime, animals, colors, family, bedtime, and more. The goal of this workshop is to provide the tools for parents to communicate long before a child is talking, because it has been shown to reduce frustration of both parent and child/infant.



### Beginners Sign Language Bootcamp 2.5 hr class/once a week/3 weeks/ 1 session per quarter

This bootcamp is great for adolescents and adults to learn basic sign language vocabulary with none or minimal sign language skills, to develop basic skills in use of signed language and knowledge of Deaf Culture. This bootcamp will introduce you to over 300 signs related to general surroundings and everyday life experiences and learn how to put those signs together for base level communication. It will focus on mastering the basics of fingerspelling, numbers, colors, facial grammar, recognizing the differences between SEE, PSE, and ASL, and conversational/cultural behaviors necessary to hold a beginning-level conversation in sign language. \*Bootcamp not focused on ASL grammar structure\*

# Resilience *cont'd from pg.1*

As we begin our walk to security, passing the Family Mart, Book Stores, and other novelty shops we hear it, the unmistakable sound of the earth beginning to rumble; then within seconds the rolling began.

As a native of Southern California, earthquakes are nothing new to me, however there is something different about this one. I look at my husband and tell him it feels like it's getting stronger. He grabs our son, tells me to grab our daughter and pushes us up against a huge concrete pillar in the middle of the airport terminal. Placing the kids' bodies between us and the pillar, my husband tried his best to cover us all with his body. All you can hear is the earth moving, items from the stores around us falling off shelves and security alarms going off. People are ducking in corners and huddling together, however no one knows what to do because the earth continues to move. What you didn't hear was anyone screaming. You would think people are scared they will scream, but they don't, there may have been crying or praying but there was no screaming. Many things will stay with me from this day, but this is one of the more frightening things to recall—the silence, the knowing of helplessness.

The initial shaking lasted minutes, 6 minutes to be exact. After what seemed liked forever it finally calmed down enough to look around but never fully felt like it actually stopped. You almost felt like you were just coming off a ride at the carnival and it had left your head spinning. We knew we had to evacuate the building for safety, so we started to follow the other passengers as they began exiting the airport. I remember stopping once we were outside to look around and see if everything was still standing. The building looked intact but of course the airport officials would have to determine if it was safe for us to go back inside.



We remained outside in an employee parking lot for five hours while they cleared the first floor of the airport before allowing us back in. Thankfully we had our snack bag filled with sandwiches and goodies to hold us over. Unsure of when and where our next meal would come from we decide to ration the lunchables we brought so that we could spread them out over multiple meals if needed.

Looking back I find it really impressive how quickly and efficiently the airport officials were able to organize medical tents, information tents, water station and portable bathrooms. Ensuring there was facilities available for those who needed them. This provided a sense of reassurance for us and took a little of the edge off knowing that there was already an emergency plan in action.

Once allowed back into the airport we decided it would be best to stick close to an exit in case we needed to escape quickly. We also were restricted to the first floor while they continued inspecting the rest of the terminal.

Announcements started almost immediately informing passengers that all air traffic was canceled and most trains were canceled too. There were some bus services to the southern parts of Japan that had not been as effected. Then there was an announcement for all US Military personnel wanting transfer to Yokota Air Base. Personnel could take buses to the base if they wanted to get out of the airport. My husband and I weren't sure what to do. Do we chance getting on the road and taking the bus to the base? We didn't know what the roads were like, we didn't know what the base was like. We did know that the airport we were in was currently safe, and my husband's command knew that we were in transit. We were afraid if we left and something happened no one would know where we were, so we decided to stay. Maybe there would be another bus later if we really needed it, we thought.

We came across a local woman who was working at a rental car agency, she happen to speak English and offered for us to sit behind the counter of one of the empty booths so our kids



could be away from the draft of the doors. She noticed we didn't have extra blankets so she pulled down the window curtains and gave them to us to use. She went out of her way to reassure us that all would be okay and she would let us know if she heard any news. We wanted to grab a few drinks from the vending machine before they were all sold out but that's when I realized I only had US dollars on me after using all our Yen earlier. So I asked if I could exchange money with her to buy some drinks. She told me no. Instead she handed me twenty dollars in Yen and told me it was a gift, she wanted me to

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# Resilience *continued from page 3*

hold onto my cash in case I needed it in the future. I was floored, this woman who didn't know me or my family had taken us under her wing and was caring for us. She ensured we had a warm place for our children to rest, that we were getting information translated to us and that we had money in case we needed it.

When it came time for our new friend to leave for the evening she came over to say her goodbyes and let us know that she had heard the airport police would be coming through with water, cream corn and sleeping bags and to make sure to grab enough for our family.

We thanked her for all her helped and wished her and her family all the best. My only regret in our exchange was that I never got her contact information in order to send her a message later once we were home safe. I have thought about her and her selflessness all these years and am so thankful she was put in our lives at that moment.

About an hour later the police did come by and passed out all the necessities just like she said they would. We were given 4 of everything-water, cream corn, sleeping bags. We were also told that the second floor was open, there was spotty WIFI connection, and we could go up to spread out if we wanted too. So we decided to make our way upstairs to the second floor to be near the ticket counters and first in line once they opened the next morning. We also started to attempt to use our iPads and Skype to make calls home to let our family know we were okay. After many attempts, we did get through to our friend back in Okinawa and gave her our status. We asked her to call our family and relay to them our status.

We set up a little camp on the airport floor, as did most of the passengers. Meeting fellow passengers from Canada,



France and Australia we all set up little sleeping areas and we shared what snacks we had. One of the fellow passengers had a satellite phone, he happened to be an Air Force pilot from Okinawa and let us

use it to call back to our Command in Okinawa to report for accountability.

Throughout the night we continued to feel quakes that were deemed aftershocks and at some point you just

grew numb to them. The news feeds were completely filled with the devastation from the tsunami that had made landfall just north of us. By morning, the airlines began to open for business again, rebooking stranded passengers. We were first in line to try and get out of



there. Fortunately, we were booked on the first flight out to LAX. Within 5 hours we would be boarding our flight, after say our goodbyes to our new terminal friends and giving them our sleeping bags so that they would have extra padding to sleep on over the coming days.

It was a long flight home to LAX, upon landing my body finally gave out and tears fell down my face. I couldn't believe we had just lived through a 9.1 earthquake. The gravity of what happen within those 26 hours would take years to work through actually. Little do you know at the time, how living through a natural disaster will shape and change you. You do come to realize you are more resilient, resourceful and equipped than you think to deal with obstacles as they come your way.

For me, returning to Japan and visiting the same airport helped me overcome the feeling of loss I had been living with for so many years after the quake. I always had felt guilty that we rushed to fly home, when so many people suffered from the earthquake and tsunami. I knew it was unreasonable to feel that way since we had two young children to care for and we were not equipped to help anyone from where we were. But it's a feeling you aren't able to let go until you revisit it I suppose and have closure. Once I was back, I felt at peace. I made a promise to myself to try and make a difference whenever possible. I've never found our kind car rental lady but I do think of her often and always wish her the best in all that life has to offer.

**National Emergency Preparedness month:  
Individuals with Disabilities | [Ready.gov](https://www.ready.gov)**

