

## STEPHANIE SALTER

# KCBS soothes when we're scared and quaking

**S**OMETIMES, when I really want to scare myself, I imagine turning on the radio after an earthquake and finding silence where KCBS should be.

Whatever would I do?

Probably go insane, that's what.

For people like me — people for whom there has been no such thing as a “little” earthquake since Oct. 17, 1989 — KCBS radio is like an audio American Red Cross. It rescues us at the height of our crisis and gives us shelter.

Last week, when a particularly sharp 4.1 quake on the Hayward Fault shook the whole Bay Area at 4:16 a.m., I could not get out of bed and turn on 740 on the AM dial fast enough. If 20 seconds lapsed between my realization of “Uh-oh, quake!” and the sound of anchorman Larry Chiaroni's voice, I'd be surprised.

But it was the longest 20 seconds I've spent in months.

When tectonic plates grind and shift beneath us, people like me experience a major adrenaline rush and get pretty scared. People like me who live alone stay scared for a long time. Whomever is behind the

microphone at all-news KCBS becomes our surrogate Mom and Dad, reassuring us just by being there that everything is going to be all right, honey, really it is.

In the dark, cold hours of early Friday morning, Mom/Dad was Chiaroni, God bless him. Sequestered with four other staffers in the KCBS studios, he had ridden out plenty of earthquakes before, but this was his first from the 32nd floor of a highrise.

As soon as he got Pat Jorgenson from the U.S. Geological Survey on the horn, he asked her straight out to tell us there was nothing to panic about. And she did, reminding everyone that there was no reason

to think this quake was a harbinger of a big one to come any minute.

As other KCBS staffers started calling in — mandatory station policy immediately after a quake — Chiaroni seemed as pleased to hear from them as I was.

Hey, Mike Colgan, thanks for checking in. What's up, Terry Conway? You're in The City, right? Woke you too, eh, Ron Lyons?

And, as amped as Chiaroni and I might have been, we knew we were way better off than Tracy Romine; he was calling from inside BART train frozen on the tracks.

Keeping with the ritual of Bay Area earthquake response, lots of regular folks called in too and spoke on the air about what the temblor

felt like in Berkeley or Palo Alto or San Anselmo. The popular reaction: “Violent.”

According to Dory Culver, KCBS's assistant news director, the station received “easily 200 calls Friday morning — and that's a conservative guess.”

“We've got 10 or 11 lines and they were all busy for most of the morning,” she said. “Right after a quake lots of people turn on their radios and think, ‘I just want to call somebody,’ so they call us because they feel like they know us. Our job is to keep the information coming, calmly, on the air and keep answering the phones. A lot of times you have to keep in mind that you're talking to people who are not only afraid but who just woke up; they say the strangest things.”

Like veteran anchor Al Hart, Culver started getting dressed for work as soon as she felt Friday's quake in her Cole Valley home.

“It scared the raccoons — they were digging up the backyard — so I knew I'd better head in,” she said.

After the sun came up and everybody calmed down, Culver said KCBS started to get the usual thank you calls: “People just want to tell us how grateful they are that we're there and we didn't scare them.”

Yeah, I know. Lying in bed, fully dressed except for shoes — and wearing radio headphones — I finally chilled out enough to go back to sleep about dawn. Maybe I could have done it without KCBS, but I doubt it. And, frankly, I don't even want to think about it. I've had enough scaring for awhile.



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