



FIELD TESTED AND READY

At one school, the final exam includes heat, mosquitoes and MREs. **DAVID SILVERBERG**



PHOTOS BY DAVID SILVERBERG

Bockistan lies in ruins.

A magnitude 7.8 earthquake has rocked the country, killing hundreds. Large apartment buildings have collapsed, communications are out, airports and seaports are closed, electricity is dead, and water isn't flowing.

Into this situation come 42 Americans ranging in age from their early 20s to their late 50s, full of enthusiasm and determination to do good and carrying bags of gear. But they're entering an unfamiliar world in a state of disaster, full of cultural pitfalls and government red tape.

What's more, this is their final exam — not to add any pressure.

Bockistan, of course, is fictional. Supposedly situated between Pakistan, Nepal and India, it should be surrounded by the towering mountains of the Himalayas. The temperature should be cold and the air should be thin. Instead, the rescue of Bockistan will take place under a blazing sun in a flat Florida field amid rampant mosquitoes and thick, humid, 100-degree air, only occasionally relieved by a light breeze or a pounding tropical rain.

But the exact details of the response to the great Bockistani earthquake of July 2016 are less important than the larger purpose: a sophisticated master's-level course in disaster management that culminates in a unique field exercise. It's a course and an exercise that physically and mentally test its students, teach them some of the pitfalls of international response, and at the same time build larger organizational resilience in the school and the surrounding community.

THE RESPONDER AND THE SCHOOL

On the bookshelf in Ruben Almaguer's office are the relics of a life spent responding to disasters.

There's a chunk of brick from the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, a hunk of steel from the World Trade Center and a partially melted engine part from Flight 77, which hit the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001. There are relics from earthquakes in Venezuela, Colombia, Armenia, Turkey and Taiwan. Hurricanes Katrina, Opal and Mitch yielded their artifacts, as did floods in Mozambique.

Almaguer served at all of them.

It's an impressive collection for a man who started his career in the Miami-Dade County, Fla., Fire Rescue Department, rising to division chief before going to Florida's Division of Emergency Management, where he served

as deputy director and interim director. From there he served a stint heading up air operations and emergency medical operations for Monroe County, Fla.'s southernmost jurisdiction, which includes the town of Key West, the other Florida Keys and vast expanses of Everglades National Park. Along the way, Almaguer collected a master's degree in public administration and one in homeland security and defense from the Naval Postgraduate School.



BOCKISTAN IN RUINS

A magnitude 7.8 earthquake rocks a fictitious country, and master's-level Florida International University students respond.

In March 2012 Almaguer joined Florida International University (FIU) as assistant vice president for disaster management and emergency operations.

This was a coming together of a unique institution and a unique individual, and the two complemented each other in unusual ways.

FIU is a young school, founded in 1965 as Miami's first public research institution and initially situated on the site of an abandoned airfield. From these humble beginnings it has grown to include seven campuses around the Miami area. The student population has grown by leaps and bounds, from an initial enrollment of 5,667 in 1972 to more than 54,000 today, and it's still expanding.

With 190 degree programs, the school has a very practical bent and an entrepreneurial spirit. It serves a heavily immigrant, working population — 61 percent of the

roofs, doing \$6.3 million worth of damage. In characteristic purposeful fashion, FIU students responded by organizing relief efforts focused on a campus center. In the longer term, the National Hurricane Center, which had its physical radar dome and instruments destroyed at its usual site, moved to a hurricane-resistant facility on the FIU campus. The school hosted a conference of hurricane experts six months after the disaster and created an International Hurricane Research Center. In 2012 it unveiled the country's most powerful hurricane simulator, known as the "Wall of Wind," on its engineering campus. It also created an entire disaster management

department complete with a sophisticated, hardened campus EOC.

When Hurricane Isaac approached south Florida in 2012, FIU shut down the campus for two weeks.

“The provost said that they made the best decision with the information they had, and when you’re in emergency management, that’s what you want to hear,” recalled Amy Aiken, the school’s director of emergency operations. “The big takeaway was that the policymakers understood that it was important to make a clear decision with the information we had. This administration takes emergency management very seriously and they’re engaged.”

Indeed, in contrast to many schools that have haphazard or low-priority emergency management offices, here emergency management sits high in the university’s hierarchy as a stand-alone department and a key priority. Twice a year the school conducts tabletop exercises based on scenarios from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and top university officials participate.

“University management is disciplined,” said Aiken. “The focus is clear. We’re pretty high up in the food chain, which makes it possible to build the program.”

Or, as Almaguer put it: “This is the best prepared university before it happens, while it happens and after it happens.”

THE MISSING YELLOW TEAM

The Bockistanis are pissed.

Instead of reporting first to the United Nations’ On-Site Operations Coordination Center (OSOCC) before establishing a base camp like they were supposed to do, the Yellow Team has wandered off to parts unknown.

That’s a no-no in this devastated country. Having gone through bag checks and medical examinations at their initial gathering point in a university building, the entire class was transported to Bockistan — in this case, FIU’s Biscayne Bay Campus. The initial OSOCC visit after arriving in the country is very important. There, team leaders are briefed on the situation and issued satellite phones and radios, which the Bockistani government insists operate on only a single frequency, and given the GPS coordinates to their base camps.

The Green, Red, Orange and Blue teams managed to get through border security despite a lot of hassles — a border guard found ammunition in one



of their packs — and find their way to the OSOCC. They did this despite bulky GPS devices whose batteries didn’t work.

But somewhere out there, the eight-person Yellow Team, representing European Relief, a fictional nongovernmental organization, is missing.

What’s more, these students are old enough and experienced enough to know better.

The academy’s first cohort is a mixed bag, but all are coming with real-world professional experience. Nearly all — 96 percent — are currently employed. Of the 42 people accepted into the class (out of 62 applicants), 34 percent come from law enforcement, 18 percent from fire service and 14 percent are in the military, with the largest group coming from the U.S. Marines. The private sector contributes 24 percent, nongovernment organizations 8 percent and 2 percent are already in emergency management. The average age is 43.

Imani Bradford, 24, is an example of a private-sector student. In her day job, she handles logistics for one of the 18 cruise lines that operate from Miami. “I do a lot of logistical coordination in my job and I like it. I realized that emergency management is a lot of coordination too,” she said.

Another cruise line employee taking the course is Oscar Celorio, 42, a claims adjuster who is also part of his line’s “go-team” that responds to crises wherever they occur.

Christine Kruse, 46, is a crime scene detective with the Miami-Dade County Police Department. Learning disaster management fit in with her additional law enforcement responsibility for disaster mortuary response. Darwin Villavicencio, 42, is also a detective, a Marine Corps veteran and an FIU undergraduate. He’s seen disaster up close: He has been deployed to both New York and Haiti.

Jose Herrera, 53, is a chief fire officer and nurse with Miami-Dade Fire Rescue. Arriving to the United States from Cuba at the age of 4, the treatment he received for a job-related injury while working at an airport so impressed him that he switched his career from aeronautical engineering to emergency medicine. He’s spent 33 years in fire and rescue and loves it, but is now seeking to transition into emergency management. “It’s a little bit difficult but just as rewarding,” he said.

Rod Elkins retired after 26 years of active duty in the U.S. Coast Guard and now works for the service in a civilian capacity. A member of the Coast Guard’s strike team responding to worldwide disasters, during Hurricane Katrina



AFFORDABLE AND ACHIEVABLE

Nearly all of the program's students are employed and most in first responder-type professions, a big factor in designing the course.

he was in charge of the agency's response in Mobile, Ala. Now he's seeking to add an emergency management degree to his resume.

Understanding the time demands and requirements of a working, professional student body like this, Almaguer and his team designed the course to be both affordable and achievable. Tuition is \$25,000 and includes teaching materials like books, which can run an additional \$4,000. The class meets every Saturday for one year with only four holidays and is culminating in this three-day exercise. That's in contrast to most master's programs, which can range in cost from \$30,000 to \$120,000 and take anywhere from a year and a half to three years — something especially difficult for working students.

That single year of coursework is one of the most attractive aspects of the program, the students said.

During the class, students take nine courses with titles like Comparative Disaster Management Systems, Disaster Response and Recovery,

Introduction to Vulnerability Analysis and Hazard Mitigation, and Field Operations.

In any other program, all this would culminate in a written examination or thesis. But here it ends in lugging heavy bags through sweltering heat and trying to figure out what is going on in Bockistan as the students apply everything they've learned in the classroom and are graded on their responses.

Finally, the Yellow Team shows up at the OSOCC. The United Nations representative, played by Jennifer Beatty, a serving official in the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, attached to the U.S. Southern Command and a veteran of Afghanistan, has grim news for the Yellow Team leaders: The entire team has been declared persona non grata by the Bockistanis and is being kicked out of the country.

It will take a trek back to border security and the intervention of the U.S. ambassador to Bockistan to keep them in the country. But the lesson is learned: When deploying abroad to provide disaster relief, good intentions are not enough. Strict protocols and procedures must be observed, particularly when it comes to credentialing and host country acceptance — not a mistake they're likely to make again.

THE BONDS OF BOCKISTAN

Over the next two days, the students go through the hurdles of international disaster relief. They speak to Bockistani officials — portrayed by veteran responders — about the situation on the ground, trying to get a comprehensive view of the disaster. Emergency medical care instruction is provided by world-recognized exotic disease expert Dr. Aileen Marty, and water purification and sanitation are covered by Franklin Broadhurst, speaking from his own experiences in Afghanistan. They receive instruction in satellite communications, erect tents and chow down on meals-ready-to-eat (MREs). They're pounded by rain that falls in cascades and struggle to stay hydrated in the suffocating heat. And they work both early in the morning and late into the night, collecting information and filing reports.

Given the close relations between the FIU faculty and local emergency response agencies, they're also visited by Miami-Dade responders and get instruction in helicopter operations and safety before being taken to remote locations to continue their situational reporting. The U.S. Coast Guard

provides a boat to ferry them, and they receive instructions in maritime operations.

A string of VIPs come by to view the exercise: Curtis Sommerhoff, director of the Miami-Dade County Office of Emergency Management, who has used FIU interns in his office and worked with the university to develop software programs, test products and study threats such as storm surge; David Paulison, former administrator of FEMA, who worked with a number of FIU faculty during his time in Washington; and Dave Downey, chief of Miami-Dade Fire Rescue.

The visits and personal contacts being made help cement the relationship between the surrounding response agencies and the students, as well as among the students themselves, who will be the fire and police chiefs and emergency managers of the future.

Then, after three days, it is over. In a moving nighttime ceremony under an open tent, huddling from sheets of rain, the students exchange gifts, receive challenge coins, and speak about the meaning of the course in their personal lives and their pride in being the first cohort. The next morning, they dismantle the tents, pack the equipment and eat their last MREs.

From there the students are bused to the university's EOC for an evaluation. They fill out forms rating the experience and the entire course, and make suggestions for the next cohort.

It's an emotional farewell. Over the year, and especially the last three days, they've bonded and shared a formative experience. The faculty provides statements praising their achievements and recounting how far they've come. The feeling in the EOC is warm and fuzzy as well as collegial. The sense of accomplishment is palpable. New friendships have been made.

Then someone turns on the EOC monitors and into the room comes breaking news: Three police officers have been ambushed and killed in Baton Rouge, La.

The talk freezes and a silent chill descends. This is real and immediate. The responders in this room will be returning to streets where disasters can occur at any time. But they will be that much more prepared for both the big events and the little ones. And so will the school and the broader community.

Reality has returned. Bockistan is suddenly very far away. +