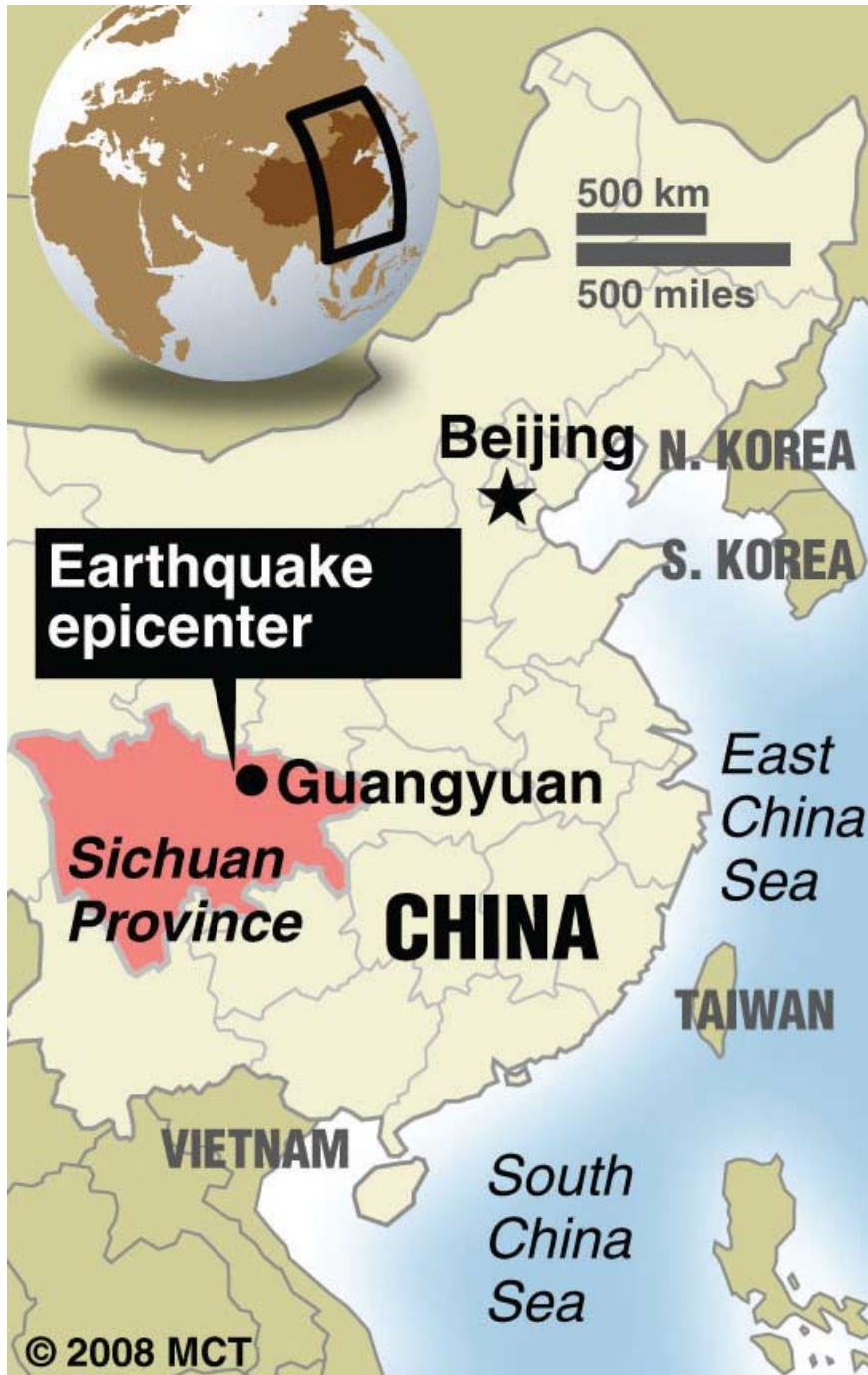


Crisis Recovery International with Chinese Nonprofit



The May 12, 2008, earthquake in Sichuan Province, China, was measured at a magnitude of 8.0. The earthquake killed approximately 70,000 people and left 5 million homeless. Responding to the needs of the survivors of the China earthquake is complicated by having to meet the requirement to work with a Chinese nonprofit. Crisis Recovery International, a 501 C-3 nonprofit, responded to the needs of the people of China by sending Sandy Ramsey, founder and president. After meeting with the Chinese nonprofit and the survivors at the relocation camp, goats were purchased to replace the animals the survivors lost. Crisis Recovery International hopes to continue to help the survivors through donations.

September 13–26, 2008

I flew to China with trepidation, on a mission to see if there was something our small nonprofit could do to help the earthquake survivors. I still had some complications to work out. I read an article in the newspaper that said the area I wanted to enter had been closed off to the public. I also had to find a Chinese nonprofit to work with, and I had no clue who to contact or how to go about finding them. I had arranged an interpreter through the Internet, and he had offered to come to the airport to meet me; I hoped he would be there. With numerous layovers, the trip to China took a total of 30 hours. The 13-hour flight over the ocean was long and left me with cramps in my legs and neck. I arrived in Chengdu, China, got my luggage through customs, and headed out to the front of the airport. A young man held a piece of paper with my name on it, high up above the crowds of people; I was so relieved to see him.

If a nonprofit wants to work in the country of China, it has to work with an approved Chinese nonprofit. How was I going to find one? When we got into the car, my interpreter told me he had found out who to contact at the Chinese nonprofit and had made me an appointment for the next morning. I was elated.

As we drove to my hotel, he told me about his experience in the earthquake. He was at his college when the building started shaking. Everyone hurried outside, and it took a few moments before they realized what was happening. They stood outside in an open grassy area, afraid of what was to come. Throughout the night, he listened to sirens as emergency vehicles headed to the earthquake area. One lane in the middle of the road was cordoned off so that emergency vehicles could drive to the devastated areas. He described one long line of constantly moving vehicles with sirens blaring as they headed out of town. But he said they still didn't know just how bad it really was.

The next morning we headed over to the office of the nonprofit, the Disaster Preparedness Center. We had a 2-hour meeting, during which they asked me questions about our work and connections to any churches. I explained that our nonprofit has no religious or political affiliations. At length, we were approved. We were told we could go to the affected area, but we would have to go that day. I went back to my hotel, checked out, and we immediately left town.

We drove about 2 hours until we came to a town that was within an hour of the relocation camp. Wasting no time, we checked in to a local hotel and then headed to the relocation camp. We spoke to the Chinese nonprofit staff about the needs of the people in the camp. Everything takes longer through a translator, and it is sometimes difficult to get an understanding of what is being said. I eventually understood that the folks in the camp were farmers whose animals had been killed by the landslides and falling buildings.

We took a tour around the camp, talked with the leader of the village, and had some meetings with the people in the camp. What did they want? **They wanted homes and work.** It struck me that in every disaster I have ever worked, the victims wanted the same thing. At the 2004 tsunami, one of the survivors told me she wanted a “house, not tent, house.” The survivors in the Chinese camp were housed in metal boxes about 10x15 feet, one for each family. It appeared that a concrete pad was laid and the boxes were put on the pads, about six side by side in each row. There were rows and rows of these housing pods, referred to as “Ready Built” by my translator. There were about 20,000 families in this relocation camp. The camp had water available and communal toilet facilities.

The earthquake on May 12 **killed 70,000 people and left 5 million homeless.** I was amazed that the government had managed to house nearly 5 million people in 4 months. The school was built first, and then the housing was put into place around the school. I watched the sewer system being dug and then bricked in. The survivors appeared to be willing to work hard and work together to get it done. One of the children I held was orphaned in the earthquake and was being raised by relatives. I was told he was 3 months old when the earthquake occurred.



I was allowed to go into the school at the relocation camp. The school rooms were the same type of Ready Built boxes in which the children lived. There was no playground equipment, but I watched the children playing and laughing and running around the bare dirt grounds. Pictures with stories of successful people hung on the school buildings; one of the pictures I recognized was of Bill Gates. I thought it was ironic that the picture of Bill Gates was hanging prominently on the school building, but the building set aside for their computer lab was empty. I walked to the opposite end of the grounds and stood at the back of the classroom, listening to the children singing loudly and enthusiastically. It brought tears to my eyes to listen to the children sing, knowing what they had been through.

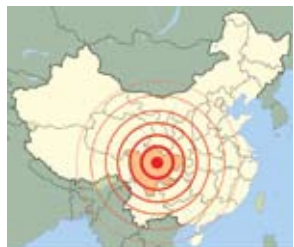


▲ Sandy Ramsey

We drove an hour from the relocation camp and arrived at one of the epicenters of the earth-



DEATHS BY REGION



Region	Deaths
Mianyang	21,963
Ngawa	20,258
Deyang	17,121
Guangyuan	4,822
Chengdu	4,276
Nanchong	30
Ya'an	15
Suining	27
Ziyang	20
Meishan	10
Bazhong	10
Garze	9
Leshan	8
Neijiang	7
Dazhou	4
Liangshan	3
Zigong	2
Luzhou	1
Guang'an	1
Total	68,636

Gansu	365
Shaanxi	122
Chongqing	18
Henan	2
Guizhou	1
Hubei	1
Hunan	1
Yunnan	1
Total	69,180



quake. I have been to many disaster sites, but I have never yet gotten used to the first sight of a major disaster; it takes my breath away. This particular disaster was no different. The mountains behind the town were scarred with large areas of bare dirt where the landslides took out the trees. **Here was an entire town that was destroyed and lying in piles of brick.** The buildings that were still standing were leaning to one side. The stairways of the buildings were open and clearly showed the power of the moving earth. Pathways through the apartments had been cleared by pushing the bricks aside, and the tall piles of brick dwarfed the people digging through them. There was a distinct smell of decomposition near a couple of areas where there were piles of brick. People dug through the piles in an attempt to pick out personal items. People were burning fake money in the small areas that had been cleared. My interpreter explained that the money is burned for the people who died so that they have money in the afterlife.

The survivors I met in the town wanted to talk about their experiences. Survivors at every disaster I have ever worked have wanted to talk about three basic things: **where they were, what happened, and how they survived.** Unfortunately for some, they also need to talk about loved ones who died. The residents explained that they heard sounds coming from the earth before they felt the shaking. It sounded like a deep rumble coming out of the ground; they knew something was very wrong. I was told about a woman who was in the kitchen in the back of the apartment when the ground began to shake. She was thrown out of the back of her apartment and into the river below. She survived with a broken leg, but the rest of her family was killed when the building crumbled.

We drove another 30 minutes through small villages and up the mountain to visit the mass grave. On our way up the mountain, parts of the narrow road were missing and there were large cracks in the pavement, making it uneven and difficult to navigate. We had to stop and back up at times to go around the areas of the road that would high-center the car. In other places, the side of the mountain had slid down onto the road. I was told that the mass grave contained

remains that could not be identified or that no one claimed. The unidentified bodies were put in a mass grave and covered with lye, dirt, and concrete. A large blue and white striped cloth was put over the concrete. Areas were built to hold sand for sticks of incense, next to which flowers and fruit were laid out. Some of the flowers and fruit were old, dying, and rotten; some were new and fresh. Large signs stood around the area, showing the design of the on-site monument that the government would soon build.

I was told that the villagers had been beating wandering dogs to death; they feared the dogs had been eating the dead, which would result in the spread of disease.

On another day, we drove to a second epicenter. As we went through the large city at the base of the mountain, broken buildings were everywhere we looked. There were two more relocation camps in this city. The relocation camps have gates and guards and are laid out in the same way, with rows and rows of box buildings. My interpreter explained that each destroyed area has a large city responsible for helping the damaged area recover. He explained that these relocation camps were in the area of a large city with many financial resources, and therefore were not in need of outside help.

We headed up the mountain and drove over cracked roads; we went around mounds of dirt that had slid down the mountain, across the road, and down the other side of the ravine. Utility poles and road guardrails were on the ground or bent over the edge of the ravine. The road was rough in places, and we carefully drove around the potholes.

The village at this location had been lovely. This was a very old town and the architecture of the buildings immediately identified it as Chinese. The roofs had collapsed, sides of buildings were missing, stairs were collapsed into rubble, and the very old Buddhist temple was damaged. The few remaining residents were tending to the temple and trying to sell items to tourists who didn't exist. This was a tourist town, and residents had no way to generate an income. These survivors were living in tents; they did not have the Ready Built boxes in which to live. This is an

area high up in the mountains with a beautiful river running through the town. It was obvious that it would get very cold there in the winter, and I worried about those folks living in simple tents. They explained how they were waiting for the government plan. Only a handful of elderly people lived in this town, and I wondered if they had been forgotten.

Back in the relocation camp the next day, we talked about the need for housing. The Disaster Preparedness Center wanted to build housing for the residents. They were especially concerned about the people who did not qualify for the Ready Builts. Those people were living in tents, tarps, and lean-tos that would leak rain and be very cold in the winter. The nonprofit was asking for money to buy steel beams for the houses. They wanted to build the houses up off the ground because they believed this would make them “**earthquake proof.**” It was a difficult discussion, as I was not clear as to why they believed this would make the houses “earthquake proof.” They estimated that it would take 4 tons of beams for each family at 5,500 RMB (Chinese Yuan) per ton, or about 22,000 RMB per family. As a small nonprofit, our mission is not housing, but the people were adamant that they wanted to have homes. I understood that, but continued talks about what other things might be provided to help the survivors.

Some of the survivors in this relocation camp were farmers prior to the earthquake. They had animal husbandry skills and wanted to raise animals again; goats were suggested as a possibility. It would be impossible for us to provide goats for 20,000 families. However, we could provide goats to start a communal herd. After further discussion, we agreed that a communal goat herd would be helpful. So, our small nonprofit bought them a few goats to start a herd. We are still getting money donated on our Web site today, and we continue to add to the herd. The Chinese nonprofit buys the goats locally, and it costs about \$150 U.S. dollars to buy two goats. The herd will take a while to mature, but the fact that the community now has a start certainly makes the future more hopeful.

People have asked me if the trip depressed me. Actually, this was one of the **most hopeful disaster-relief trips I have taken.** Most of the survivors are housed and safe. The food in the Sichuan Province is abundant. The survivors want to leave the flat-lands to go back to their mountain



homes, and who can blame them? The location was gorgeous. The flat-lands are not nearly as beautiful, and they are certainly not home to them. I hope that some large nonprofit will help them build the houses they want. But for now, we have touched each other's lives. My life is certainly richer for the experience, and I hope that our small contribution of a goat herd will enrich theirs as well.

Addendum (May 18, 2009): *Crisis Recovery International* now has an agricultural specialist who is going to the relocation camp this spring to provide some suggestions on animal husbandry. The nonprofit hopes that he can provide suggestions to the people that will increase the productivity of all of their animals. ■

▼ About the Author

Sandy Ramsey, MA, LPC, LMFT, is the President of Crisis Recovery International (www.CrisisRecoveryInternational.org). She is a Fellow of the **American Psychotherapy Association**, as well as a Fellow of the **American College of Forensic Examiners Institute**. Sandy, a licensed mental health therapist, took her first disaster mental health course in 1994, and has been responding to disasters ever since. She now responds to disasters on a full time basis.