

# 1946 Tsunami a Turning Point for FEMA Mitigation Expert

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HILO, HI—Hawaii-born Jeanne Johnston can still vividly recall the huge tsunami that devastated the big island of Hawai'i in 1946.

Johnston, now a FEMA mitigation specialist, was living in her grandparents' three-story home on Hilo Bay. She was a six-year-old getting ready for school with her four-year-old brother, David, on the morning the big wave struck. The two, and others, ran barefooted to the jungle behind their home to escape the incoming water.

"My grandfather broke his ribs diving from the front porch into the house when the wave picked it up and pushed it into the backyard," Johnston recalled. Her grandfather stayed in the home until water subsided.

Johnston's family members all survived, but the house was badly damaged and the first floor was knocked from the building.

The onslaught of water killed 96 people in Hilo on that April 1. Across the island territory that in 1959 became the state of Hawaii, there were 159 killed. Deaths were recorded on every island but Lanai and Niihau.

As a survivor, Johnston became fascinated with tsunamis and the historic event. (At the time, tsunamis were referred to regionally as "tidal waves.") Johnston



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wanted to hear others' memories as well. She began recording them for posterity's sake. She also intended to use the recordings to educate and hopefully save lives.

Collecting the stories led Johnston to become co-founder of the Pacific Tsunami Museum, which opened in downtown Hilo in 1996. Her videotaped stories are now part of the museum's permanent collection.

Johnston shared her memories recently with FEMA Corps members working at the DR-4366-HI Disaster Recovery Center in Kea'au. She gives presentations on the historic disaster regularly to Hawaii school children.

Johnston earned her masters' degree in disaster communications at the University of Hawaii. She worked for the Hawaii State Civil Defense Agency and joined FEMA about 10 years ago.

In her role as a mitigation specialist, Johnston often has the opportunity to share with people ways to protect their properties against all hazards, including tsunamis and earthquakes.

"As a result of my own experience, I've always been motivated to help others protect themselves and their property from that type of destruction and other dangers," Johnston said. "My work with FEMA lets me do just that."

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(on right) FEMA Mitigation Specialist Jeanne Johnston describes to three FEMA Corps member



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