

# Communities rallying to help Tonga recover from tsunami



PHOTOS: KARL MONDON — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Shanna 'Uhilamoelangi watches Elia Grew push a cart of donated supplies into the Anamatangi Polynesian Voices warehouse in Mountain View on Thursday. The Bay Area Tongan community hopes to ship 2 tons of donated medical supplies to the Pacific Island nation.

## Anamatangi Polynesian Voices of East Palo Alto among groups offering assistance

By Aldo Toledo

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**EAST PALO ALTO »** For six days after a volcanic explosion and tsunami buffeted the islands of Tonga with devastating force, Tonga Victoria of East Palo Alto felt dread, panic and fear wash over her.

Like many Tongans across the country, Victoria watched in horror on the morning of Jan. 15 in Dayton, Ohio, as reports came back from her homeland that Pacific Ocean waters had slammed into the island where her husband lived.

The eruption of the underwater volcano near Tonga that Saturday was likely the biggest recorded anywhere on earth in the past three decades. Dramatic images from space-filled TV and phone screens the entire week showed a huge plume of gas, ash and smoke spewing into the atmosphere and tsunami waves were captured tearing through Tongan villages. To make matters worse, the undersea fiber-optic cables that connect Tonga to the rest of the world were severed, leaving no way for outsiders to communicate with the is-



Tiffany 'Uhilamoelangi-Hautau, executive director of Anamatangi Polynesian Voices, desperately wants to help the ravaged islands.

land.

It was a nightmare, said Victoria, who tried everything she could to get in touch with her husband, who she was supposed to meet up with in Tonga in March, but to no avail.

"The last time I had talked to him was at 3 p.m. that Friday, and I do not go to sleep until he messages me," Victoria said. "I woke up randomly at 11 p.m. and he hadn't texted me so I was like 'what happened?' I went back to

sleep and woke up Saturday to so many people texting me asking if my husband was okay. But it was completely silent. There's nothing I could say or do."

For nearly a week, Victoria cried until her tears ran dry and prayed as much as she could for any sign that her husband was okay. It wasn't until it was announced that three Tongans had died from the aftermath of the eruption that Victoria really began to panic.

### HOW TO HELP

Anamatangi Polynesian Voices is working diligently to organize and send aid to Tonga to help recover after the tsunami and volcanic eruption. If you'd like to help, donate to the Tonga Tsunami Relief Fund. So far, people have donated more than \$20,000. Anamatangi Polynesian Voices hope to reach a goal of \$100,000 in assistance.

"There was so much pain and fear," Victoria said with tears running down her face. "Fear really hit my heart that day."

But after six days, Victoria finally heard from her husband. Her next step was to see what she could do to help. Just a day after talking to her husband and finding out he was safe, Victoria boarded a plane to the Bay Area from Ohio where she was staying with her brother to help organize the relief effort on the Peninsula.

Last week, Victoria and members of East Palo Alto's Anamatangi Polynesian Voices — an organization of Bay Area Tongans and Pacific Islanders



# Tonga

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aimed at sending aid to their homelands — hauled about two tons of pallets of PPE and other protective equipment donated by Kaiser Permanente in Redwood City into their Mountain View warehouse to prepare it for shipment. They were dressed in traditional Tongan clothes in solidarity with their people.

The devastation wrought by the volcanic eruption and tsunami was enough to deal with for the Tongan people, but a surge in COVID-19 cases made it clear to Anamatangi members that COVID-19 relief was as necessary as food and rebuilding materials.

None of the dozen or so Anamatangi members and volunteers who are working to send relief to the island have stopped working since the tsunami: and they don't want to.

"I've been rocking and rolling since I got here," Victoria said. "I haven't had time to stop, and I don't want to stop."

Along with aid sent to Anamatangi Polynesian Voices by Kaiser, a number of other agencies and organizations have sent support,

too. Stanford Health Care donated about 140,000 N95 and KN95 masks, enough to provide at least one for everyone living on the island. Sutter Medical Center also has donated about 10 pallets of equipment, and a group of Menlo-Atherton High School alumni has also pitched in to send about a dozen pallets of supplies.

Anamatangi Development Director Shanna 'Uhilamoelangi said it was "shocking and emotional" to see so much of her homeland devastated by a natural disaster.

"It's still painful to think about," she said.

But despite the feeling of loss she felt in the aftermath of the eruption, 'Uhilamoelangi said all she could think about was organizing with Tonga to get supplies to them as quickly as possible. The organization — which was started by 'Uhilamoelangi's mother and father in the 1970s — is expecting pallets upon pallets of supplies from donors, a feat for the small group.

"We're small but mighty," 'Uhilamoelangi said. "I just can't imagine what they're going through, so any little we can do to help is the intention. Anamatangi is mobilizing."

For Anamatangi Polyne-



KARL MONDON — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Elia Grew and Peter Saurara stack donated medical supplies from Kaiser Permanente into the Anamatangi Polynesian Voices warehouse in Mountain View on Thursday.

sian Voices, this isn't the first time they've had to mobilize quickly to send aid to their brothers and sisters in the Pacific. In 2009, during the devastating Samoa earthquake and tsunami that killed nearly 200 people and left hundreds of others injured, the East Palo Alto Pacific Islander community came together to send aid to Samoa.

But for Tiffany Uhila-Hautau, director of Anamatangi, the eruption and tsunami in Tonga were

more personal. Uhila-Hautau has been at the forefront of seeking aid for Tonga, meeting with wealthy donors and organizations for support, but also thinking of her cousins, nieces and other family and friends on the island.

Wearing a flower on her head in traditional Tongan fashion, Uhila-Hautau — a strong woman whose professionalism hardly wavered in the face of a difficult mission — was brought to tears thinking of the children and elders who must

have suffered in the aftermath of the disaster. For her, the image of crying babies and helpless elders is intolerable. She decided the best way to keep the tears at bay was to do everything possible to help her people.

"Community organizing isn't foreign to us, mobilizing isn't foreign to us, so when we got the call that we could help, my initial thought was 'wow, how good is God to let us be the vessel to provide aid to Tonga.' It's been a whirlwind of emotions. There are some days we're smiling, and others we're crying. But we're just grateful we can do this."

On a whiteboard at the group's Mountain View warehouse space, the phrase "Ko ki moutolu na'e teu'i wei nui'a" was written for all to see. It means that despite all the fear, anxiety and pain, "you all were prepared from the beginning."

"I keep telling my people, don't be scared," Victoria said. "Your faith has gotten you this far, so do not be scared."

