



This profile was written for and published by the Rowlett Lakeshore Times newspaper both in honor of one of its outstanding citizens and as a public service announcement to raise awareness of the program this citizen initiated.

SAVE YOUR COMMUNITY BEFORE THE DISASTER STRIKES

For the past year, Rowlett citizen Whitney Laning has worked tirelessly to bring together the Rowlett Citizen Corps Council (RCCC). RCCC is a nonprofit group dedicated to finding funding for the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training program, equipment, and team support. He's been working to make the community a safer place for both citizens and emergency respondents, and the state has taken notice. Laning was named one of the Five Outstanding Young Texans of the Year at a special black-tie ceremony held in the state capital.

"It was very rewarding and humbling to be in such company with these great folks that are doing such tremendous things around the country," Laning said. Past recipients included George H.W. Bush in 1956 and Henry Cisneros in 1976.

The importance of Laning's work can be seen through a tragic comparison. Although the recent earthquake in Chile was much more powerful than the quake in Haiti, Chile experienced significantly less damage to its infrastructure thanks to strict building codes and much less loss of life thanks to having trained emergency response teams on the ground. While earthquakes may not be everyone's concern here on the caprock of Texas, emergencies of various types can occur anywhere. In all cases, the damage and loss of life is reduced when trained response teams can provide on-the-ground help immediately after disaster strikes. However, this only occurs when the community itself is full of trained volunteers ready and willing to assist. People who are already knowledgeable about basic field practices for rescue and triage and who may live or work in the affected area.

As it turns out, this need for a trained and ready citizenry is a significant concern for many fire chiefs throughout the country. When Fire Chief Larry Wright mentioned this concern to Laning more than a year ago, he expected the comment to be forgotten or passed off as it had been so many other times. Unlike all those others, though, Laning took action. He took the time to learn what kind of help firefighters needed to provide the community with greater safety and followed that up by moving forward to organize this support group within the city of Rowlett.

The primary program of the RCCC is the CERT program. This organization functions during normal emergency situations by providing canteen services to the city's professional firefighters – giving them cool drinks, food to help them keep up their strength, and a temperature-controlled on-site location in the form of a travel trailer to rest when fighting a long-term fire. Citizen-members who have been trained in the CERT program are also able to jump in and lend a hand when the emergency personnel are overwhelmed.

"If we had a large-scale disaster like a tornado come through here, it could be 24-72 hours before we received any kind of state or federal assistance. That's where these citizens will be able to make a real difference," said Wright.

As part of CERT, citizens are trained in first aid, damage assessment, evacuation procedures, and even some light search and rescue.

Laning's leadership in these programs has been instrumental in developing a program that's received multiple awards and recognitions according to Greg and Lisa Peoples, the Junior Chamber of Commerce members who nominated Laning for the Outstanding Texan award. "Whitney is the co-author of the bylaws, shaped the mission statement, teaches the CERT courses, and serves as a spokesperson, fundraiser, and grant writer for CERT," they said in a written statement. "Under his leadership, FEMA Region VI recognized the Rowlett CERT program as a Best Practice. The program has also been nominated in the Public Safety category for Municipal Excellence by the Texas Municipal League."

Laning's strong hands-on approach has left little room for neglecting responsibility, allowing applications to miss deadlines, or other business to be delayed. His enthusiasm and energy have been infecting.

Chief Larry Wright echoed the Peoples' comments regarding Laning's contribution to the city's CERT programs. "Since the very beginning, Whitney has been instrumental in the success of the Rowlett CERT program," he said. "His technical expertise with computers broadened the capability to advertise and promote the program. His impact on the program will always be recognized and has made the program one of the more outstanding programs in the country."

In his involvement with the many different elements of the CERT program, Laning saw the need for additional equipment and training materials, but the program itself didn't have the necessary licensing and structure. He had to start the RCCC group as a fundraising mechanism and, in the process, set the example for those who follow him to get involved in as many aspects of the program as they can. He encourages everyone to continue learning and growing to better serve the community.

Laning's devotion and drive have encouraged many within the community to join the CERT program and to get involved in community service in other ways, which has contributed a great deal to the success of the program as well.

"Whitney's dedication to the community and each citizen within it is unparalleled," said Mayor Shane Johnson. "His heart pours into his work with our CERT team. Our community is safer, more knowledgeable, and better prepared for any disaster, natural or man-made. We are in his debt."

However nice the accolades are, Laning remains stunned by the recognition. "Receiving this award is one of those defining moments that you have," Laning said. "I never imagined receiving something so big."