



Abe Powell

**Co-Founder/Executive Director
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In the aftermath of December 2017's Thomas fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, flooding caused an enormous debris flow. On January 28, 2018, Abe and Jessica Powell began coordinating a community response—in the form of the Santa Barbara Bucket Brigade—to this environmental emergency in Montecito. Since then, more than 3,000 volunteers have cleared mud from homes, assisted families in locating lost belongings, and helped restore area trails and walking paths.

Vanessa Bechtel asked Abe Powell these questions.

6 How did you begin the task of successfully clearing more than 100,000 yards of devastating debris?

We began our journey the way all great journeys begin: one step at a time or, in our case, one bucket after another. The magnitude of the problem was simply overwhelming. My wife and I knew the right thing to do would be to help our neighbors dig out, but it is not enough to want to help your neighbors. You actually have to get out there and do something to actually help them. So we got our shovels, called our friends, and started digging, house by house, block by block. We started at one friend's home with some buckets and wheelbarrows and a small group of friends. When the community saw what we were doing, something clicked. By the following Sunday, more than 1,000 volunteers had shown up to help us dig.

7 How did you approach onboarding more than 3,000 volunteers?

I was a volunteer firefighter and had learned the Incident Command System (ICS) that first responders use to coordinate emergency response. We decided to adapt that system for spontaneous volunteer deployment. Our modified ICS system focused on chain-of-communication as opposed to chain-of-command. Volunteers are working for free, can leave anytime, and rarely have much training for this kind of work. ICS is a top-down model for command and control of professionals. Our system is a ground-up model, focused on safety, flexibility, and communication to make sure that volunteers get the information they need to accomplish relief goals in the field. We call our system Community Self-Rescue.

8 What was been the hardest lesson you learned these past two years?

This work is too important to be done only by volunteers. We need to build capacity for coordinated, effective community response to crises quickly. After three months, we realized that we needed some paid organizers to do the behind-the-scenes work that organizes, equips, feeds, and deploys large groups of volunteers. We realized that for this work to continue, the Bucket Brigade needed to become an ongoing professional operation.

9 What was it that best prepared you for the immense challenges you must have faced in your heroic work?

Engagement and persistence. The Bucket Brigade system is the product of 23 years of community building, organizing, and action around neighborhood preparedness, environmental protection, and recognizing climate change. One of the key lessons I have learned over the years is knowing when to take action. There comes a point when it is go time, and I believe that we, as a nation, arrived at that point in 2017—the worst* year for natural disasters in U.S. history. Some responses went well, like the one in Montecito. Others didn't go well and people suffered. Now that we are engaged and we know what works, we need to stick with it.

10 What advice would you pass on to others who might be considering a career in work similar to yours?

Begin it now while there is still time. Existing disaster-relief systems are getting routinely overwhelmed. Community organizing around grassroots resilience is needed more than ever before. We need community leaders to step up to this kind of organizing, training, and deployment as a full-time job all across America right now. It's go time.

Santa Barbara Bucket Brigade co-founder and executive director Abe Powell teams up with the organization's mascot and trail inspector, Hazel, by San Ysidro Creek in Montecito.

**According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2017 tied with 2011 as the worst year for natural disasters recorded in U.S. history.*