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Instinct told Isaiah Brokenleg '05 to help near site of bridge collapse

Summary: A sense of community, perhaps, but basically sheer instinct drove UMM alumnus Isaiah Brokenleg immediately to assist the victims following the collapse of the I-35W bridge.

(August 17, 2007)-A sense of community, perhaps, but basically sheer instinct drove Isaiah Brokenleg '05 immediately to assist the victims following the collapse of the I-35W bridge. From the third floor of the West Bank Office Building where he works as an intern for the American Indian Community Tobacco Project, Brokenleg heard “a very loud thunderous and deep rumbling sound that lasted for about six seconds but felt more like 15.

“I was talking to my supervisor about getting something to eat when the bridge collapsed,” recalled Brokenleg.

“I stood up, went over by the window and was shocked at what I saw. I was able to see the tail end of the bridge collapse, just the bridge settling in after its fall. There was a large plume of grey-ish white-ish colored smoke near the area where the bridge broke. There were cars stopped just before the area where the bridge broke off. There were cars still on the bridge and there was destruction everywhere. I looked toward the other side of the bridge and saw the mangled iron and broken concrete. I took this all in for a short period of time. It felt like minutes but it was only a couple of seconds. It was all so surreal,” he said.

After he called 911, Brokenleg and Kris Rhodes, his supervisor, headed to the site thinking essentially that they would offer to give commuters a ride home. “There were no emergency medical people there yet. It wasn’t until we got closer that we saw the extent of the trauma.

“As we walked closer and closer to the scene the tension level went up,” shared Brokenleg. “People were hurt, some were bloody, many had looks of fear on their faces. There was a large group of children in a grassy area next to the sidewalk. They were scared, screaming and crying, some were injured. We stopped and decided to focus our efforts there,” he added.

Brokenleg asked people if they were okay and, prior to the arrival of emergency personnel, tried to assess any serious injuries.

“I also asked people if they wanted to use my cell phone to call home,” he said. “Many of the parents were not at home yet and so many children left messages. If children did reach their parents, parents wanted to talk to me.”

Brokenleg was near the site when the semi-truck cab next to the school bus caught fire, which he said scared the children who began running for safety. He helped to calm them and gather them into a building so their parents could eventually locate them, while also guiding arriving parents who were searching for their children as well as connecting calling parents with their children via his cell phone.

“When the children heard their parent’s voices they began to cry,” shared Brokenleg. “I didn’t know what to tell them so

I continued to reassure them that they were going to be okay and that everything would be alright. I didn't know that this was true but I knew it would help calm them down. I tried my best not to show fear or emotion as I knew it would just scare them more. It wasn't until I got home that the tears and emotions emerged.”

Recalling his experience on August 1, what will Brokenleg most remember?

“The children. I will never forget the fear, terror and emotions I saw on their faces that day. I felt like there wasn't enough I could do. I felt helpless in many ways and I wished I knew the right words to say or the right things to do,” he said.

As a UMM senior, Brokenleg received the President's Volunteer Service Award. He holds a bachelor's degree with two self-designed majors, applied social/human rights and multicultural studies. He will soon complete a master's of public health in community health education.

Although instinct drove Brokenleg to the bridge site, he would like to think that the instinct is a result of his experience while a student at UMM. His list of service and volunteer contributions as a UMM student are a textbook of engagement.

Although there were many heroes at the bridge site that day, said Brokenleg, he does not consider himself to be one of them. “At UMM we are taught to be proactive and to be involved in our community,” he said. “I know many of my experiences there (service learning, community service, student activities, volunteering, etc.) have taught me to see myself as a member of the community and not just a student. It is seeing the difference one person or one group can make that teaches us to stay active and know that we all can make a difference in any situation.”

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