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YOUR ACCOUNT

SEARCH

ADVANCED SEARCH

NEWS

Front Page

The Teller

Editorial and Opinion

Design Matters

Profile in Commerce

Banking & Lending

Commercial & Industrial

Residential Real Estate

By the Numbers

People

Real Estate Records

Credit Records

NATIONAL NEWS

SUPPLEMENTS

BROWSE

Back Issues

Records

Classifieds

Other Publications

SERVICES

Advertising Info

Article Reprints

Contact Us

Editorial Calendar

Newsstand Locations

PROFILE IN COMMERCE

Home Inspector Is Natural Fit for Natural Disaster Relief

By *Aglaia Pikounis*
Reporter

When disaster strikes, 60-year-old Richard Berger is not far behind.

The local home inspector has traveled to Florida, Arkansas, North Carolina and as far away as Guam to help victims rebuild after hurricanes, ice storms and typhoons. As one of more than 5,000 stand-by disaster reservists for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Berger has lent his expertise in building safety to help out in federally declared disaster areas.



Richard Berger, a Stoughton-based home inspector, recently returned from Atlanta where he helped train Hurricane Katrina disaster relief workers.

After Hurricane Ivan struck last year, he was deployed to Pensacola, Fla.

When Hurricane Isabel wreaked havoc in September 2003, he was sent to the Outer Banks of North Carolina, and last winter, when a blizzard paralyzed much of New England, he spent weeks in Maine and New Hampshire.

His latest assignment took him to Atlanta, where FEMA established a deployment and training center at an old convention center to help in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Berger, who returned from Atlanta at the beginning of October after a month-long stint, served as a safety director training thousands of relief workers and making sure they received the vaccinations they needed.

“I was telling them all the unique things that they could expect to find at a disaster site that they may not be aware of so they won’t end up being a disaster statistic,” said Berger.

Berger sought out to work for FEMA around the same time that he was establishing his home inspection business six years ago.

For about three decades prior to that, Berger had worked in the corporate world inspecting

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commercial and residential buildings. As the director of environment, health and safety for the Sheraton hotel chain, he supervised safety during the construction and renovation of hotels. When Sheraton hotel chain was sold to new owners, Berger said he decided it was time to end his corporate life.

Since he had spent so much of his professional life inspecting buildings, he thought it was a natural transition to get into home inspection. After completing a home inspection certification program at Northeastern University and joining the American Society of Home Inspectors, Berger launched his business from his Stoughton home.

Berger, who has a passion for flying and purchased a Cessna 172 10 years ago, decided to name his business AeroHome Inspection Services. He also used his airplane to market another talent: aerial photography.

Real estate companies have hired Berger to photograph high-end properties for marketing purposes. One real estate agent, who specializes in selling lakefront residences, hired Berger to photograph 20 lakes in southeastern Massachusetts for a Web site.

“I decided to combine my avocation with my vocation,” said Berger.

But Berger acknowledged that it took some time to build his home inspection and aerial photography businesses.

“When I started it six years ago, I had revenues of zero,” he said. “During the winter months the home inspection business slows.”

Berger wanted to keep himself busy during the slower periods in the winter, and find another source of income, so he sought to be a reservist with FEMA.

But for Berger, working for FEMA is more than just a side job that provides extra money. It gives Berger the opportunity to assist people whose lives have been turned upside down.

“It certainly is a source of income, but it really has two paybacks. It feels good to help these folks out,” said Berger.

Still, Berger finds it challenging to be away from his family, including his wife of 37 years, Sandra, for weeks – sometimes months – at a time when he’s deployed to a faraway destination. And he says the work can be physically and emotionally draining. It’s not unusual to work 12- to 14-hour days, six or seven days a week, Berger said.

When he was in Atlanta, he would go out to lunch and hurricane victims would see the FEMA logo on his shirt and stop by to thank him or share their stories. One evening when he was in the lobby of the hotel he was staying in, he encountered a pregnant woman with her little daughter who had lost their home.

“The little girl was crying and she [the mother] was crying,” he said. “All I could do was console her.”

“You see that sort of thing all the time. After weeks of doing that, it can become very, very emotional,” he said. “But it’s rewarding at the same time. I gave her some hope by telling her how she could get help.”

As for his home inspection business, Berger says he should have started his business long ago. Berger tries to make inspections an educational experience for homebuyers, and enjoys showing a young couple unfamiliar with a home’s systems how they run and function.

“I insist on having my clients with me when I’m doing the inspection,” he said.

Berger takes his time during inspections, spending a minimum of three hours onsite examining the home and answering homebuyers’ questions. Afterward, he prepares a lengthy report on his

findings, instead of simply providing a checklist like many other inspectors do.

“I treat this as a profession,” he said.

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