

CUPE 503 Member Profile

Recreation Supervisor Judith Dupuis

With 29 years of recreation experience, CUPE 503 member Judith Dupuis has been keeping people safe from harm most of her life. She began as a lifeguard and swimming instructor working her way through school. As a Recreation Supervisor in the amalgamated City of Ottawa, she has led staff teams of fifty and more, carrying out large scale recreation programs where public safety and accident prevention are paramount. Years of first aid and lifesaving training instilled a desire in her to serve the public on a greater scale. In planning her retirement she sought to volunteer in a meaningful role in the lives of those in distress. With this in mind, she enrolled as a disaster relief volunteer with the International Red Cross.

As a university student, Judith spent her summers in Edmonton where her family lived for ten years after leaving Ottawa. When floods began to devastate the province of Alberta in the summer of 2013, she felt a strong calling to return and help her former neighbours. After the Red Cross sent out their appeal for flood relief assistance, she accepted a two week deployment using her annual holiday allotment and boarded a plane for Calgary.

Her adventure began before she reached her destination as her plane caught fire and had to make an emergency landing in Thunder Bay for six hours. After finally reaching Calgary with three hundred other committed volunteers she received a 45 minute orientation and was bussed to Okotoks - an agricultural community located 40 minutes south of Calgary, population 26,319.

Judith was assigned to the midnight shift of a shelter operating from the local curling rink. She supervised and saw to the needs of its 200 temporarily housed residents who were evacuated from their homes and farms until they could be assessed for a safe return. The shelter was divided into sections for women, families and men with the curling rink canteen serving meals. The closest hospital located in nearby High River was also flooded and their medical personnel were assigned to the shelter.

Many of the shelter residents were in a state of extreme anxiety from not knowing the fate of their homes and slept poorly. Judith would be primarily preoccupied with helping the affected access medical care, arranging for mental health services and, where necessary, intervening in ill-timed romantic interludes, and dispatching the police. Much of her work was spent convincing the displaced to use the services available to them. She worked hard persuading people to accept help, to act in the interest of their own safety by sleeping in the heated and supervised shelter, not in their cars.

Many of the affected were temporary foreign workers from the Philippines and Mexico employed at a nearby meat packing plant. Some of these workers had their work terms interrupted by the flood and were served with automatically generated correspondence stating that they had overstayed their work terms and were at risk of deportation. Judith assisted by getting their documents translated and liaising with immigration officials to get the necessary work term extensions.

After the water levels stabilized, some victims were able to return to their homes. Others whose properties were unsafe and unsalvageable needed more long term lodging.

CUPE 503 Member Profile

Recreation Supervisor Judith Dupuis

A week into the flood, the area was hit again with heavy rain. The province called for the Okotoks shelter to be shut down and its residents relocated to the University of Calgary.

By the third week, people were breaking down emotionally and Judith helped them access mental health services. At least one nervous breakdown was prevented.

As a member of the City of Ottawa's Emergency Response and Lodging Committee, Judith was reassured to find that her experience and training found her well-prepared to deal with disaster. While others struggled with working in a team setting under stress, her years of rescue training made emergency response second nature. Her skill in tactfully handling public inquiries and complaints was essential in helping the displaced deal with their problems and the intense emotions that came with them.

She formed strong bonds with several groups of displaced persons. One group of migrant workers from the Philippines had one fluent English speaker among them and felt threatened when they were asked to go to different shelters away from each other. The anxiety was particularly acute with those workers needing assistance to translate documents specific to their work terms. When asked, they refused to be separated. Judith negotiated on their behalf with the province of Alberta to keep them together in the same dorm at the University of Calgary once the Okotoks shelter was closed. They were especially relieved to learn that Judith would continue to be their shelter worker.

In the face of losing their homes, farms and worldly possessions Judith came away awed by the victims' resilience.

Her experience with the Alberta floods has given her a sense of mission about how she wants to spend her retirement and has awakened a passion to serve those in distress. The International Red Cross valued and appreciated her contribution and has placed her on a list of experienced disaster relief volunteers who will be called to serve where ever disaster strikes next.