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## **NSU disaster expert stunned by Iowa floods**

BY LISA BOLIVAR

When the floodwaters jumped the banks of the Cedar River that runs past Cedar Rapids, Iowa, they swept away people's lifelong belongings and swept in health-threatening toxins from corn fields upstream.

That left Cecilia Rokusek wondering how much of the devastation could have been prevented.

Rokusek, project manager for Nova Southeastern University's Center for Bioterrorism and All-Hazards Preparedness, or CBAP, went to Cedar Rapids in June to assess the damage -- especially the emotional and psychological effects.

"I am in the disaster field, and my first impression was, when I stepped out of my car, I felt empty," she said. "Empty and helpless."

Rokusek said she told herself: "I am smelling the scent of death, but they lost only five people. No, this wasn't death. It was the scent of destruction and sadness. The stench was overwhelming."

After the initial shock, Rokusek said what she found surprised her.

"I've interviewed people who have lost everything. If I could compare it to Katrina [in New Orleans], where the people were waiting for the government to step in, the people here are caring for themselves," she said, adding that neighbors were taking in neighbors, and people were living in tents and vans even though "FEMA here is reacting faster."

Rokusek, who lectures on disaster preparedness, was amazed to learn that out of thousands of shelter beds, only 472 had been used. Federal Emergency Management Agency officer Russ Edmonston, speaking from Iowa, said the flooding had left more than 26,000 people without homes.

Recently named honorary consul of the Slovak Republic for Florida, Rokusek made it a point to visit an ethnic neighborhood in Cedar Rapids known as the Czech Village, and the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library there.

At the museum, staffers were busy digging out the first floor, which had ceiling-high flooding and was filled with slimy silt that had soaked into books and flipped a grand piano.

Much of the contents had been evacuated, museum president Gail Naughton said. But while they had a preparedness plan, she wishes they had taken more valuables out before the waters rose.

“I don't mean to say we had this false sense of security, but even at that time, none of us had forecast what actually happened,” Naughton said. “It was this phenomenal set of circumstances, and it will probably be the subject of studies for generations to come.”

Rokusek plans to be one of those studying the situation -- while she also lends a hand with the healing.

She will bring the lessons learned from the flooding to her students in South Florida, and together they will study how to prepare better for such cases and help people recover.

Her department and students will continue to offer psychological support to flood victims, organizing fundraisers and relief efforts.

So far, people have been provided with free tetanus shots, and the area is mobilizing against a mosquito problem, but for now, Rokusek said, “It is just a matter of coping.”

Looking at the piles of family furniture on street corners, she urged people in vulnerable areas, such as hurricane-prone South Florida, to have a disaster plan in place, putting valuables and personal papers in plastic and having an escape plan for the family.

Then there is the recovery period, she said, and that is what she and her students will focus on.

“We will be talking to people and counseling,” Rokusek said.