

O.C. teacher shaken, but undeterred in Chile

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David Antonio Valle had been in Santiago, Chile a week when the country was jolted by a massive earthquake.

Instinctively, Valle jumped from the bottom bunk bed where he'd been sleeping and sprang to the closest doorway. After glancing out and noticing the glass windows lining the hall of the hostel where he was staying, he thought better about going any further. He stayed in his second-story room.

"It was like being on a boat," says Valle, 30, a middle-school school teacher and La Habra native, of the 8.8-magnitude quake.

When it was over, Valle's building wasn't in ruins – but many others were. Destruction was widespread and more than 2 million people were displaced.

Anyone else might have jumped on a plane headed straight for Orange County, and briefly, Valle considered leaving. But then he swept aside the thought.

Shaken? Yes. Undeterred? No.

As soon as Internet service resumed, Valle e-mailed his family, posted on Facebook and let everyone know he was OK... *and* that he's staying to fulfill his yearlong commitment teaching English to K-12 students in a suburb of the Chilean capital.

"These students are still going to come to school every day. They're not going to leave. So why (would I) leave?" says Valle by phone from Chile, where he is one of 71 foreign teachers who came to Chile last month as part of a program called TeachingChile.

The program recruits native English speakers to teach in Chilean schools. Its founder, Bruce Thompson, says that this year he's seen not only a burgeoning number of applicants from California, but an increase in experienced, credentialed U.S. teachers, including some whose districts didn't renew their contracts.

"...There were definitely a lot of people, even from the semester before, from California school districts because of the budget crunch," says Thompson, from Santiago, where he created the program five years ago.

Valle is on leave from his job teaching 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students at Project Hope, a county-run school in Orange for at-risk and homeless youth. He left in the midst of a budget crisis statewide, and he says there's no guarantee he'll have a job when he returns.

He took a leap of faith, he says, because teaching abroad and strengthening his Spanish skills had always been a goal. But it was a decision he weighed seriously because he wasn't leaving behind just any classroom of students – his students in Orange are kids who depend on their teachers, who sometimes are the most stable people in their lives.

Since being hired to teach at Project Hope School in 2003 — first as a teacher's aid, then substitute teacher, and finally a full-time teacher — Valle has helped his students navigate every imaginable situation: from having to move out of motels every 30 days, to living in neighborhoods rife with prostitution and drugs.

"(Growing up) we weren't a rich family. But I didn't have to worry about where I was going to sleep at night, or about one of my parents being locked up in jail, or about kids teasing me about the holes in my socks, or the shoes that I've had for three years that don't fit me anymore," Valle says.

"The students taught me to look at things in a different light."

Which made leaving for Chile last month that much harder.

But on his last day of school, Valle sat his students down and explained, as he had many times before, that he would be back in their lives one day soon. As a farewell gift, one of his students gave him a braided bracelet of intertwined strings. He wears it now every day, a reminder of how their lives are forever connected.

It's a bond that can be easy to overlook. In the race for good grades and strong test scores, sometimes what helps students succeed is just knowing that they have a teacher who cares.

So, there may be obstacles along the way back to California for Valle as the school budget battles continue, but he's undeterred. One way or another, he'll find his way home to his students.

After all, not even an 8.8 quake can rattle this guy.

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