

One Big Zero Indeed

By Deston Nokes

Wow.

I just selected "insert date" on my computer and boing! January 2, 2000, appeared instantly — zeros and all.

So what did I do to prepare my older laptop computer for the possibility of cataclysmic failure? Not a thing.

And at the utility where I worked? Months upon months of Y2K preparation: studying disaster scenarios, huddling with Nurse-Ratched-serious consultants, spewing reams of contingency plans, more meetings, press inquiries, and, of course, many more meetings; all conducted under a very serious umbrella of purpose.

One simply doesn't joke in the face of an impending apocalypse.

When the news came that we all would be in a state of heightened readiness for at least 96 hours over the New Year weekend, we soon realized that the joke was to be at our own expense. Travel and celebration plans were canceled and work shifts were assigned.

Many of earnestly us felt that, as with police officers and hospital workers, working to ensure the public safety was a higher calling than revelry with loved ones. Let others have their fun: we were poised to ensure the safe flow of energy to homes, whether we were appreciated or not.

So, when everyone else tried to decide between black or blue shoes, we gathered in our makeshift war rooms on New Yorker, framed by banks of phones, 2-way radios, satellite television and walls of computers. We could have launched a space shuttle with our hardware.

We watched the unveiling of a New Year on CNN. First New Zealand: nothing happened. Japan: something happened . . . but it wasn't Y2K related. China? They didn't spend any money on the problem, did they?

Zip. Nada.

Surely Russia: The ghosts of Chernobyl could raise their glowing heads.

Nope. This Y2K apocalypse was shaping up to be one big zero indeed.

Some of us figured that SOMETHING would happen on the East Coast. After all, we have more computers than they do in Pakistan or Pago Pago. But New York emerged unscathed by the Y2K bug, we realized that "nothing" was to be the watchword of the night. Soon our conversations were limited to improving preparations for the next millennium: such as getting a better caterer.

At 4 a.m., while looking out at Portland's empty wet streets and wiping sleepy eyes, the truth was painfully apparent:

All the millions of dollars, preparations and humanity dedicated to the Y2K bug can be looked at either as the greatest avoided disaster in the history of humankind or as the greatest cosmic joke we ever perpetrated upon ourselves.

I think Chicken Little would be proud.

Deston Nokes most recently served as the public information officer for a local utility. He lives in Tigard and feels very smug about not stocking up on anything.