

Skip the scary movie -- check out your local school instead

Mike Roberts

The Province

August 4, 2004

While The Province movie team recommends M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* as the most frightening thing on offer this week, our popcorn-munching duo quite obviously overlooked the scariest show in town -- the 13th World Conference on Earthquake Engineering at the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre.

These guys -- 2,400 earthquake experts from 56 countries -- don't say 500 years any more, they say 50 or 100 years. They don't say "if" when talking about B.C.'s "imminent" Big One, the experts say "when."

And if that wasn't enough, one of the hot-button topics at the conference yesterday was earthquake school safety, here and around the world. The news was grim, and only vaguely hopeful.

Andy Mill, chairman of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C.'s Seismic Risk Task Force, said 800 B.C. schools are at risk of collapse "when" a major quake shakes up the region. As many as 1,000 B.C. schools, he added, don't meet current safety standards. This isn't Turkey or Nepal or some ancient town in Italy, this is right here in B.C. The schools -- like so many thousands around the globe -- were simply not designed or constructed to withstand earthquakes.

This doesn't surprise Nathan Lusignan, a 20-year-old former Van Tech student who founded the Van Tech Lizards, a student activist group alarmed that Van Tech topped the seismic-threat list when the B.C. government surveyed area schools four years ago.

"In a way I got involved for selfish reasons," says Lusignan. "I went there for five years and now my little brother is going there and my kids will be going there."

Lusignan, who will be attending the University of B.C. this fall, left Van Tech to help co-found a Vancouver group called Families for School Seismic Safety. The group's campaigns have led to a groundswell of support, from government agencies to the PhDs assembled for yesterday's presentation on school safety.

"Now we're getting into the mechanics of what needs to be done," says Lusignan. "This is a very young science, people have not been doing this very long, so it's important that they pool the knowledge . . . and, of course, provide the funding stream."

Five years on, Van Tech has still not been fixed. Only 11 Vancouver schools have been upgraded in the past 14 years. Provincially, the bill will easily top \$1 billion. But

Lusignan is hopeful.

The APEG, in conjunction with UBC researchers, will complete its assessment of B.C.'s schools in October.

And begin lobbying for the money needed to fix our schools so they're safe for our kids, lucky so far. Voice mail: 604-605-2622

E-mail: mroberts@png.canwest.com