

New tsunami pod offers an alternative escape option

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In Ocean Park, on Long Beach Peninsula in Washington state, Jeanne Johnson, with her dog, Trixie, peers out of her two-person tsunami survival pod. The sphere has a hatch with a waterproof seal, and two small windows and two air vents that also can be made watertight.

Photo by: Greg Gilbert/Seattle Times/TNS

OCEAN PARK, Wash. — Jeanne Johnson figured out how to survive a hurricane when she lived in New Orleans. When the family moved to Kansas City, she taught her kids to take cover from tornadoes. When Johnson bought a house near the ocean in Washington state, she started worrying about tsunamis. They are huge waves caused by earthquakes in the ocean.

Now, Johnson is betting her life on a new, high-tech solution: a tsunami survival capsule.

The bright orange sphere is meant to protect people from drowning or being crushed by debris. It's made of aluminum, with a watertight door and tiny porthole windows. There is also a GPS beacon that will send out a signal to rescuers, and it even has its own air supply.

Johnson is the company's first customer, and she has been working on the best way to climb and close the hatch. The pod will be terrible to spend any time in, said Johnson, who works for the computer software company Microsoft. "But it's better than the alternative."

Inspiration From Tragedies

The pod is the brainchild of engineer Julian Sharpe, who started Survival Capsule LLC. He got the idea after a 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, which killed more than 200,000 people. Sharpe was on vacation near the ocean and wondered how his family could get to safety if a tsunami struck the Pacific Northwest.

“Our kids were very little. We had two huskies. How could we evacuate in time?” he said.

In 2011, an earthquake and tsunami killed 16,000 people in Japan. At that point, Sharpe and coworkers started to work seriously on their escape pod.

Sharpe runs a small company that analyzes and tests airplane parts. He used the same methods to design capsules strong enough to withstand a tsunami wave.

“I would use this for my family,” Sharpe said.

Not Everyone Likes It

Chuck Wallace is an emergency management director for Grays Harbor County in Washington. He doubted the escape pod will really work in an actual tsunami.

Wallace asked what would happen if it got stuck under debris or the pod began to leak. “You’re just not going to convince me they’re safe,” he said.

The best way to escape a tsunami is to find high ground. However, escape pods are good for those who would never be able to make it, like the elderly or disabled, said Eddie Bernard. He is a former director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory in Seattle.

“We need to be thinking about all the tools available to save lives,” he said.

"A Very Viable Option"

Johnson took out a loan to buy her 4.5-foot-diameter, two-person pod for \$13,500. When a four-person version is available, she intends to buy that. “I want to have room, in case my kids come to visit,” she said.

She is stocking the capsule with water, a 40-day supply of food, warm clothing and an emergency radio.

Sharpe says he’s got a list of about 400 potential customers around the world. He is focusing mainly on Japan where it’s important to be prepared. One community along Japan’s coast is thinking about helping residents buy survival pods.

“What we’re trying to do is increase people’s chances of survival,” Sharpe said. “If you have no other means of escape this is a very viable option.”

Preparing For The Unexpected

Johnson says having the pod lets her enjoy her new home without being afraid.

“I can hear the ocean in my windows,” she said. “I can walk on the beach with my dog.”

Johnson lives off the Cascadia Subduction Zone, an earthquake zone in the Pacific Ocean, which has caused at least 40 major quakes and tsunamis over the past 10,000 years. The most recent one was in 1700. It's impossible to know when the next one will strike, but Johnson says she doesn't think too much about it.

"I bought that capsule to give me peace of mind, so I can sleep at night and not worry," she said.