

KATRINA JOURNAL



PEDRO MOLINA

BY SONJA MAY

Sonja May of Ilwaco kept a journal while she is in Louisiana as a Red Cross volunteer in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She says her reasons for keeping the journal vary: "One is the (Long Beach) Peninsula has only a small Red Cross office with one part-time person. Katrina has taught us anything can happen. I hope a similar disaster never happens here, but it's possible. I thought this journal could inform in an entertaining way. Whatever its faults, I experienced it, it's the way I see the world, and the world sees me."

9/13/2005 Red Cross Disaster Training

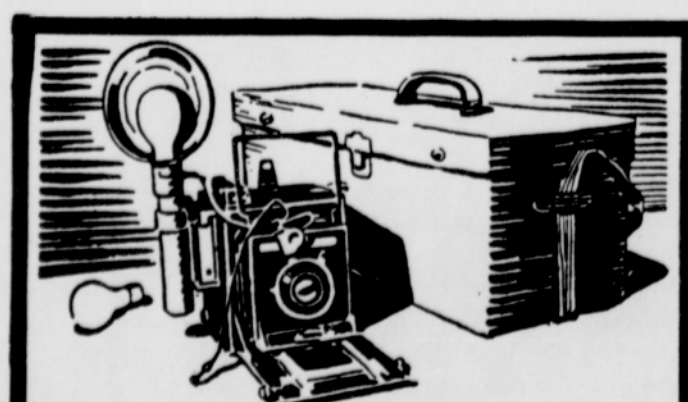
I really want to volunteer to help the Katrina victims, so I started with a call to our local Red Cross (642-5766) which gave me the Training Center number in Longview (1-360-423-7880). They said, "Could you show up Wednesday at 9 a.m. for fast-track training, beginning with 'Introduction to Disaster'?" You bet! My family knows I hate to travel, or at least I hate getting there, but I'm going this time, no matter what.

I easily find the Red Cross Center at 1265 14th Ave., and with all this energy, I'm there before the doors are open; but soon I'm directed upstairs to a classroom. Writing my name on a placard, I look around as the place fills up with eager faces like mine. Kari Myklebust, our trainer, is pretty, personable, and so committed to the Red Cross and the experience of disaster volunteer work that you're sold just at sight of her. She starts the class with a handout and a video. She describes ERVs, trucks that take food and water to people on the street, as one of her favorite jobs. I find out the Red Cross will pay airfare, \$15 food a day and even for the air-mattress I'll be sleeping on! How about that: I was ready to pay for everything myself. This gets better and better.

Back home I'm solving the problem: how do you put your life on hold for 21 days? Red Cross is not government funded, but privately funded, so you need to commit 21 days to them; obviously they'd prefer people not decide after three days they want to go home. Can I get someone to substitute for my first week of watercolor class at Clatsop Community College? Roy Garrison kindly agrees to do so. I quit my part-time job at Moby Dick, and Fritz Cohn, the owner, thanks me for going. Then I go to the library to copy a map of Louisiana. I need to know more about where I'm going, and I find exotic French names like *Natchitoches*, *Plaquemine* and *Opelousas* that I can't wrap my tongue around. No matter: I begin to pack and put together a personal First Aid kit. I buy water decontaminate pills and flashlight batteries (neither of which are useful when I get there, since bottled water is readily available and flashlights provided).

My second class is on Mass Care & Sheltering, and there are lots of new people: the class has grown. Valeree, our second trainer, is animated, funny and knowledgeable. She says Patience & Flexibility are Red Cross watchwords. I thought the Red Cross was mainly nurses, but the fact is they need all kinds of skills and, as mother used to say, "lots of hands make work go faster." When we finish, we get ID cards, and I feel proud.

I now need a physical exam and some shots, and learn that hospital appointments are booked months ahead of time.



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It's a valuable lesson about the health care system, so far new to me. I finally get into a clinic, find I'm in good health and fax the exam to Longview and finish packing.

Two days later I get "The Call." In three days I'll be in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and will be deployed to a shelter from there. I call my son and daughter to tell them I'm going. They're startled but supportive. Now I'm really excited and eager to go.

At my third and final training class, many previous classes come together. I see many new faces but I spot a few from my first session and learn some have gone already. A few are having second thoughts when they hear about hardships like no showers, but Kari says you can change your mind any time, that we are under her wing, and can call her 24/7 for anything at all. Our last task is to confirm our flights ourselves, which took hours of patient waiting on the phone. I finally left to get an inflatable air-mattress, my bed for the next 21 days. The final chore, how to get to the airport if you have no spouse, is taken off my hands by volunteers from Longview who will drive me to Portland. Every step of the way is teamwork, teamwork, teamwork. Already I'm leaving the solitary artist behind, and it feels good.

9/17/05

A Red Cross shuttle meets our plane in Baton Rouge and takes us to a Wal-Mart warehouse, now converted to Red Cross headquarters. We join thousands of volunteers of all ages and description milling about or standing in lines to register, a process including getting picture-ID, a Red Cross jacket, and ends with an assignment to various shelters all around the Gulf Coast. Behind a fenced-off area of the parking lot, our luggage lies heaped in random piles; a guard checks ID each time anyone passes through the gates. As the hours wear on, the heat and humidity become more intense and standing in the sun is not advised. At the close of the day, Dave, who I trained with in Longview, is assigned to Houston, Texas, while I begin my Red Cross experience by sleeping on army cots at a place picturesquely called "God's Restoration."

9/18/05

Early morning in the showers, I have my first adventure when a black roach as big as my thumb jumps on my foot and I whomp him with my towel. At a café on the way to Headquarters in Covington, I meet a motherly looking woman named Jean, an interpreter for the hearing impaired, who is feeding two elderly homeless deaf men out of her own pocket, so I use my brand new Red Cross debit card to pay for their breakfast.

Arriving at Covington Station, I can choose between cooking for Emergency Reserve Vehicle volunteers (they deliver daily free food from the trucks) or going to a shelter at 5th Ward Jr. High School in Bush (Louisiana). Bush it is, as I know I want to meet local people. My fellow teammates are Sam, a smart, solid young investor, and Steve, a big, calm bear of a guy with a good sense of humor. Bush, here we come.

I've noticed a slender, unshaven guy slipping in and out of the station. Turns out he's Max, our very own Bush Shelter Manager. His cap is on backward and he calls everyone dude, though he looks to be about 35. We begin loading our luggage into his dusty rental car, but suddenly I find myself on the ground looking up at everyone. I found the only drain hole in miles of solid curb and stepped in it. The nurse decides my ankle is sprained not broken because it doesn't hurt. Much. Only I can't walk. Never mind, I promise them to do this, that and the other thing, but one thing I know — I'm not going back. They load me in the car with a too big lace-up bandage on ice, and we take off to Wal-Mart for supplies. The guys stand in line outside in the blazing sun; they're admitted one by one because there are no longer any employees and only recently re-opened. Most stores are either damaged or boarded up against looters. All have Help Wanted signs.

On the way to Bush, Max tells us he hasn't slept or showered in three days and lives on B-12 shots. My first day as a Red Cross volunteer helping the evacuees at Bush is disappointing. I have to sit out of the way with my bandaged foot up, but at least I can read to little Brianna, age 6, who charms me with her attentions.

9/19/05

This morning, though, I'm up with the help of a cane, serving breakfast to the residents (I refuse to call them 'clients') with Sam, then I empty all the overflowing garbage cans. I meet my first resident, Imelda, who believes the hurricane is God's test for her to keep from trafficking with men. Still, there are 30 others to meet in the shelter even though it's love-bug season,

little black flying creatures so thick it's hard to keep them out of the food, so named because they're coupled permanently, but luckily, they don't bite.

9/20/05

We serve hot meals twice a day on tables set up outside the entry doors of the school. A volunteer is up around the clock, so I volunteer for the 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. shift. I'm not alone; the sheriff and deputies stand around drinking coffee. "Where ya'll from?" "Washington State." Astonishment. "Long ways from here!....Radio says a 4 called Rita gonna hit Friday, ah huh, a direct hit they say," said with a weary sigh. Tim, the security guard who tells me his home is gone, is clearly ready for time-off he probably won't get in the future. He has a facial twitch and can't sit still. He constantly walks over to spit in the grass. The night is now pleasantly warm; best of all, the love bugs diminish, though they'll return in the heat of the day.

I mop floors and clean up in general, so my shift goes fast.

The guys sweat all afternoon setting up new portable showers delivered earlier today.

When Brianna's young mom Joanne hears Hurricane Rita's coming toward us, her slender hands visibly tremble.

Then Sam says to me, people coming, go do that hospitality thing you do so well. That means I greet everyone with a gift of now precious bottled water. We don't even brush our teeth with local water, which may be tainted. I walk excruciatingly slow, my foot is swollen and black but doesn't hurt too much unless I put full weight on it, so I keep on the move and go greet them.

Steve is a real buddy and Sam takes over when Max is gone, which is a lot. Max finally returns with the news we're to pack up and merge with a larger shelter at Folsom, and hooray, Rita's veered away from us for the time being.

9/21/05

Max gets angry when he sees me on my feet and brings out a yellow blanket and insists I put my foot up. Later, I wash Brianna's hair in the shower but I get soaked too, not in the plan. The kids seem supercharged even for 6 year olds, and I wonder how much it has to do with being traumatized, having little sleep and too much sugar. After lunch I suggest we organize a nap time, get Max's and their parents' permission, and with Phyllis, who thinks it's a super idea, find a cool, quiet room and set up cots. I figure they'll rest there for half an hour if I'm lucky. The kids are charmed with the idea, but can't sit still. Suddenly, without warning Kevin goes down, Isabelle stops talking and twitching, and there goes Brianna. I can't believe it, they're actually asleep. Kevin moans and shudders, and I wonder if he's having nightmares about the hurricane, so I smooth his little back and he sleeps on. Soon it's 3:30 and I wonder if I should wake them. Kevin's mom looks in, pleased and amazed. The Sheriff's deputy though, has had enough and storms in slamming doors; this is her space, she barks. The kids sleep right through the altercation. Nurse Phyllis talks to her, and she angrily relents, but later hurts something into the trash can so close it brushes my face. But I think the children felt safe for the first time in awhile so I'm happy this has worked out. And later, when I'm serving dinner, little 3 year old Isabel, who never noticed me before, toddles over and brushes lovebugs off my bare legs, where they're driving me nuts because I can't touch them while handling our food because it's unsanitary. I'm pleased.

11 p.m. Melt-down with Max, who orders me to bed, as we move to Folsom tomorrow. But I was sharing ice cream with Joe Pierre, Kevin's dad, a strong, dignified black man about 45, and the Sheriff, who seems riled at Max's bossy ways. I think I'm smoothing things out, plus I want to hear what these locals have to say, so I don't obey. But Max angrily beckons me over, he wants to give me a talking-to. I'm too old for this, and I just look at him silently until he gives up and goes away muttering.

9/22/05

Early today we pack the trucks, leave the school clean and caravan off to find Folsom. We get lost several times but finally find it, unpack and settle down for the night.

9/23/05

Folsom Shelter is in Magnolia Community Park, Saint Tammany Parish, about 45 minutes north of New Orleans. Louisiana is largely Catholic and everything is identified by what parish it's in. While the residents sleep on cots in the huge gymnasium, it's very crowded for us Red Cross Volunteers. All 18 of us are quartered in a small room with cots barely one foot apart. Sleep will be hard to get; it's really hot, there are talented snorers, and Rita's veering our way again. But Patty, our Shelter Manager, has a great smile. She says Folsom's sheriff went "nose to nose" with her when she requested a guard for the evacuees' belongings. "He had a nice, quiet community here,

