

and we and our charges better not disrupt it," She remembers he said. But she said that was nothing compared to the last shelter she managed, where they stuffed paper with her name down the sink drain and flooded the floors, angry because she established a 10 p.m. curfew, not the 2 a.m. allowed by the previous shelter manager. This incident and others seem to me to illustrate that residents are largely unaware that Red Cross is privately funded by caring citizens, not government funded.

Afternoon: Hard as it is to believe, we have an impostor. A very large woman and her luggage sit behind our registration desk in the gym, claiming to be new staff. But we weren't expecting any and Patty's gone. So Tricia cautiously decides to wait for Patty to return. As Tricia was here when I came and I'm learning from her how this shelter's run, I agree — but it's uncomfortable not knowing who the woman really is. I'm also trying to keep my eye on the butcher knife we borrowed from the kitchen to cut apart the Army MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) we are having for dinner, as I don't think it wise to allow it to walk off. Finally Patty returns and, and confirming the woman isn't Red Cross authorized, militia are summoned to politely but firmly request her to leave, a suggestion she resists at first but finally she leaves. There is always an armed Marine walking our perimeter on the hour, first slowly through the shelter, then around it.

9/24/05

If it isn't snoring, it's cell phones that ring at 3:30 a.m. So I tiptoe out and clean bathrooms and pick up garbage on the grounds. Jimmy from Bush, always a gentleman, shakes his dreadlocks 'no' at me and taking the big can firmly from me, takes it out himself. Later, a touch on my elbow, I turn around and there beaming up at me is little Kevin. I haven't seen him since our move; he jumps up and into my arms, and I walk down the hall with him. We from Bush are now bonded like family.

At our staff meeting I suggest no cell phones in the sleep area and everyone agrees. Then another woman and I are told we're to transfer to Slidell to feed ERV drivers. She tearfully agrees. But I say firmly, "With respect, I don't want to go." I get to stay.

The shelter has a doctor and nurse, and also mental health counselors for our support, but they are susceptible to stress too. One mental health counselor can't stop crying.

At 4 p.m. I'm napping when a loud voice shouts over the intercom, "Evacuate! Evacuate! Evacuate!" I shoot up, grab my purse and run out. Fire engines come roaring up. In the milling crowd outside, little Brianna stands alone while her mother Joanne, 27, moons over David who is only 17, so I watch her, though she's calmly eating a green apple. She wishes aloud she had another so I say, Look, magic! and pull one out of my pocket. She can't get over it.

It's a false alarm. But the next crisis concerns me. It seems Joanne and her two children could be kicked out of the shelter because David is underage, but eventually it's discovered that in Louisiana the age of consent is 16. I'm worried Joanne's conduct will cause the kids further suffering and homelessness, so I beg David to back off.

9/25/05

Wakened again at 3:30 a.m. Max strides in with what seems like a strobe light. I sit up and glare, which he doesn't take too kindly. Soon everyone's up, though, because with a loud explosion the power goes out. The toilets won't work either. Patty speeds off to buy an emergency generator; where, I wonder, with most stores ruined or closed? Complaints begin, tension rises. But after lunch, when we're told to get ready for 30 new evacuees, people begin to pull together. Joyce, an elderly lady who always wears her hair in curlers, gets territorial and insists the empty area next to her cot was set aside for a 'special unit' but we put a cot there anyway. Everyone goes on a cleaning bender, but just when everyone's proud that everything's looking good to welcome the newcomers, we're told the order is canceled and people are crestfallen.

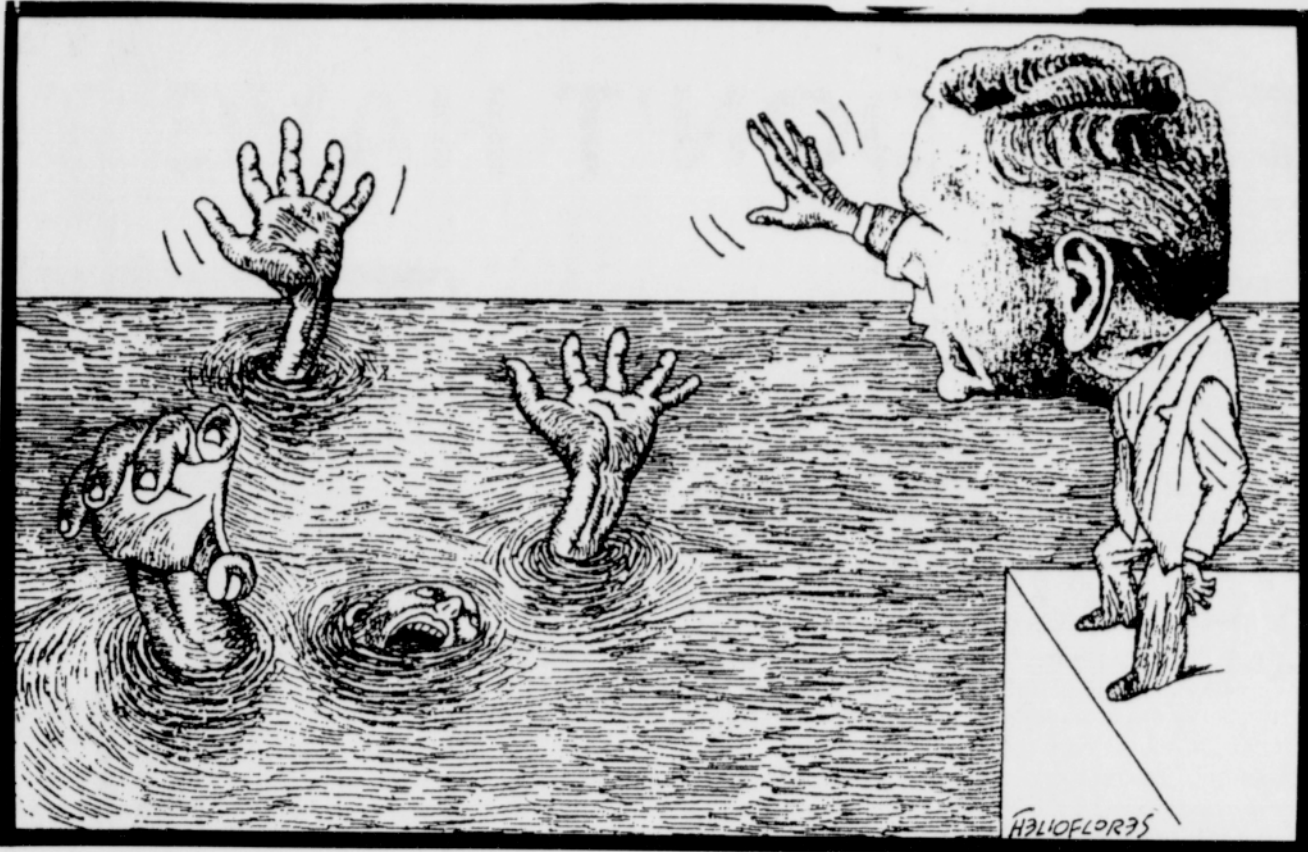
I tell everyone I'm just a 'grunt' following orders, and privately I'm glad. I don't want to supervise. I like to mix with the people on the floor. I'm surprised to find I'm good at it. The residents tell me I'm 'real.' Only Max accuses me of trying to "get people to love" me (!?). Yesterday Gayle from the kitchen left the shelter in a huff because of something Max said. Next, Max has a verbal confrontation with a family that has staked out a large corner of the gym and pretty much rules the roost there. But they're eventually escorted out by the Sheriff; seems they have been stealing from other evacuees. Stan, Patty's supervisor, has been called in and he evaluates Max as 100% correct in handling this incident.

This afternoon the Mayor of Folsom visits in a show of good will.

9/26/05

Chaos around Max again. The Bush residents explode. Seems he walked around scratching himself after a shower with only a towel on, and they're highly offended. But it's really enmity that started in Bush. Jeff, a counselor, and I are asked to create a grievance form; there is no official one. Later Max is asked to leave and the residents are jubilant. However, he seems to have turned this disgrace into a triumph, for he's having his picture taken giving candy to children and he's packing up MREs to take with him. True to his dramatic sense, at the last minute before leaving he turns and hands me a "Performance Evaluation." Heavily blacked out are earlier recommendations that I improve; he has hand-drawn and checked a new category for me: "Outstanding." Amazing.

This afternoon we happily move to new quarters in a beautiful new community hall on Saint Johns Catholic Church



HELIOFLORES

grounds, 10 minutes drive from the shelter. Later I entice everyone to sing happy birthday to red-headed Kay. I give her an inexpensive necklace wrapped in a silver Pop-Tart wrapper. But John the nurse refuses to sing with us. Kay has given us a bumpy ride with her demands for drugs, and he's not in a forgiving mood. I give my air-mattress to Wanda; she's had a hip replacement and has a handicapped child. It's no sacrifice for me, my back's good and I don't mind the cots, though they are breaking under some of our heavier residents. We have replaced 25.

9/27/05

Derek, a new volunteer, drives me, Vera and Denise to New Orleans to see if their house has survived. While New Orleans was damaged by wind and floods, further inland it was 150 mph winds that downed trees and swept away houses. Louisiana's magnificent oak trees are huge, the circumference of a branch as big as most tree trunks, and when overturned by the wind they do a lot of damage. We drive through a countryside of young pine trees all twisted halfway down. The Mexican tree crew (they tell us they make \$375 a load) say the trees are twisted all the way down the trunk and are very hard to cut.

Driving through Slidell we see story-high debris bulldozed to one side to clear the highway. We pass through a high corridor of boats, refrigerators, stoves and parts of houses. A parking lot we pass is piled high with recently donated clothing that is abandoned — with no system left to process or distribute them, they lie under the sun and rain. The city is deserted. The abandoned cars lining the streets are marked down the middle with a residue of white where the water rose and each house is not only marked with a waterline, but an eerie orange and lime green legend is sprayed on each house, a legible report of who examined it, when, and what was found, dead or alive.

Derek said he saw only five moving cars in New Orleans yesterday, all militia.

Arriving at Vera's once lovely street lined with French peach trees, we see they remain green on top but are crisply brown and dead below, where the poisoned water enveloped them. I amazed how potent it is. Derek explains that when he was a helicopter spotter he wore scuba gear on his legs to go into the water, but his unprotected arms developed a scaly, weepy rash.

Vera is fortunate. The water rose over her floor but no further. Black mold grows on the walls. Her refrigerator is covered with it and with shimmering bugs attracted to the mold. We don't dare open it. It will have to be discarded. Mold grows in this heat and humidity very fast, especially in the drowned homes. The following illustrates how fast: Red Cross ERV vehicles bring food to the shelter twice a day, but with no refrigeration the containers sit in the kitchen until replaced the next day. I lifted the lid of one to look at leftover peas we'd served only two hours earlier and was startled to see a green mold over them so solid you could pick it up with a spoon.

We hear on the radio that a rescue helicopter has gone down, and I'm sick to realize it's the one in the sky we saw coming into the city. We drive through the deserted downtown to famous Jackson Square, which is dry as it's on higher ground, and pass the only other moving vehicle, a truck carrying precious cargo — the label reads "Potable Water, 1025 Gallons." Popular Decatur Street now holds big, tented compounds. They are quarters for workers, each one three city blocks big. We leave New Orleans on a high overpass to the bridge that crosses Lake Pontchartrain. There we are stalled for an hour with a bird's eye view of ambulances and sheriff's cars roaring up and down below. Though we walk down toward the bridge, we learn nothing and return to the car.

This seems to be a good place to report what both Derek and Jeff told me. They said that local police took food and water away from the evacuees stranded on the New Orleans overpass "so they'd leave" because TV crews were coming. It made no sense to me and I didn't believe it until I met an eyewitness in Victoria, another Red Cross volunteer. She said a gun was point-

ed at her and she was told she couldn't give water to a crying baby. But she only pretended to obey; resourcefully, she quietly dropped water bottles down into the street, hoping evacuees would find them later.

10/01/05

Local people come every day now to the shelter with toys, clothing and even cash from their own pockets as well as fast-food box lunches. I mention that the guys need things too. Shortly afterwards, Doug, homeless even before Katrina, gets new shoes, clothes, a backpack, and I feel I've convinced a local businessman that even with the limitations Doug's heart trouble places on the work he can do, he sincerely wants a job. Bill W., in his wheelchair, gets much needed new clothes. Another man in a wheelchair is mute; he writes down his family's phone number, I contact them, soon they'll come for him; he breaks down and cries with relief at the news. Six new volunteers now arrive at the shelter, FEMA moneys start to come through, some residents begin to leave.

Last week I noticed that Justin sleeps all day, so I told the doctor. It turns out he drank tainted water and had a fever that dangerously dehydrated him. With medicine and Gatorade he's now up and walking about. Late one night when Mabel's baby Christian was teething and crying, I got baby aspirin for him and as Mabel sat rocking him to sleep in the darkened gym, she quietly told me how she swam through the water in her house to her attic. Her mother guards her comatose sister in what we call our Special Needs Unit, really just a small room set aside for very ill evacuees. Mabel's 10 year old son was separated and airlifted to Texas and she lives for the day they are reunited, worrying how frightened he must be. Patty works to fly Mabel, her mother and the comatose sister to Texas, but it's complicated. A small private plane called Angels Flight has already picked up Red, a kindly construction worker from Texas that Katrina stranded here. He made himself useful babysitting and will be missed, especially by the children. Derek will drive him to New Orleans. There's little time to spare as the pilot can't wait. Many turn out to bid him a teary goodbye.

10/03/05

To our surprise, some still register to enter the shelter. A man comes in so traumatized I can't get a word out of him. He's concentrating too hard on not breaking down. Words don't help at times like this, so I just grip his upper arm, hard, while he stifles sobs. Rita caught him in Texas. Now home at last, he sees his house is gone, he's homeless, and the shock is too much. Finally, I take him to a private room with a counselor, hoping he can let it all out.

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It's time for me to go too, and on my last day I'm thrilled when Kevin's family drive me to their farm and I get to ride with Kevin on his horse for 10 minutes. That's a photo I will always treasure. All of us who went through that experience are close in a way I can't describe, and I hope we will be in touch. Later, when Patty drives me to Headquarters in Covington to check out, I meet Bonnie who says she's leaving too, so we hook up. We have one last job. We deliver an ERV back to Headquarters in Baton Rouge. There are a few tense moments finding diesel fuel. The lines are so long at the gas stations, children play around the pumps as they wait. But at the third gas station we try, we hit the jackpot and fill up. Two hours later we drop it off at Headquarters, jump on the shuttle to the airport and make our plane just in time. Red Cross arranged for volunteers to meet me at Portland. They feed me and drive me home. It's a special service because I have no one to pick me up. Good thing, I'm on my last legs. Thank you, thank you!

I feel lucky I could go. I know many people wanted to. It was my personal statement. My family supported me, and I feel I represented them too. I know each Red Cross Volunteer has a different experience, but I wouldn't trade mine with anyone, and I would do it again in a minute.

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