

LESSONS OF DISASTER

" . . . for such a time as this.?"

Operation Hurricane Relief Camp Indy – Slidell, Louisiana

by Michael F Elmore, MD

On Saturday, September 3, 2005, I received a call from Jeff Cardwell, President of the People Helping People Network. Jeff is owner of the AMI Do-It Best Home Center, 3205 Madison Avenue, Indianapolis, IN which has been a Disaster Relief Collection Center for Hurricane Katrina. Jeff was calling looking for volunteers to fill the Marion County Sheriff's Motorcycle Drill Team bus which was traveling to New Orleans to establish "Camp Indy" in Slidell, Louisiana on the North shore of Lake Ponchartrain directly across from New Orleans. Most of those who live in Slidell work in New Orleans. Slidell and the other North shore communities to the West were hit very hard by Katrina.

Monday, September 6th - Labor Day

At 8:30 AM, the bus left Jeff's store with a team of 24 volunteers. There were 5 law enforcement officers, 4 doctors, 2 nurses, 3 tree removal specialists, a minister and several others committed to making a difference in the "Green Zone" – the area immediately outside the "Red Zone" (the flooded area of New Orleans). Jeff had received several desperation phone calls from nurses in Slidell Memorial Hospital begging for help saying the hospital was flooded without electricity, patients were dying in their beds and their situation was desperate. Jeff responded, "Help is on the way! We will come!"

We drove South and after 15 ½ hours on the road, still 90 minutes from Slidell, we entered the black out zone which stretched three states wide and all the way South to the Gulf. The only lights occasionally seen came from generators. It was eerie as we drove slowly at 50 mph along I-59 between trees which had been cut and bulldozed off the interstate so that the road was passable. Our bus was followed by a steadily growing convoy of semi-trailers which joined us along the way. Each was packed with food, water, clothing and other donated items.

At 11 PM we entered Slidell which was dark and under Marshall Law with a 6 PM to 6 AM curfew. The only vehicles were police and rescue vehicles. We were stopped by Slidell police just as we reached the hospital. Our officers Bart McAtee, Deputy Chief Sheriff of Marion County, with his

Deputies Joe McAtee, Clayton Willis & Kevin Kendall dressed in uniform and fully armed introduced themselves. Our doctors were allowed to go to the Emergency Department. Never before had we ever been met outside an ER by armed National Guardsmen. We met the doctor in charge who told us that there were very few patients left in the hospital as most of them had been evacuated. The nurses who had called Jeff had apparently panicked fearing the worst was about to happen. Several of the doctors were staying in the hospital because their homes were either destroyed or uninhabitable. The electricity had just been restored that day, and they were doing fine.

DISASTER LESSON # 1 – During a disaster, information you receive, even from the best sources, is often very wrong! People panic in the midst of a disaster when they are cut off from the world.

Our convoy headed to Community Christian Church a few minutes away. Jeff had been in contact with Pastor Johnny Beyer, and told him we were coming to set up Camp Indy at the church. The church was dark when we arrived, but a church member opened up the fellowship hall behind the church which turned out to be a perfect warehouse for our relief efforts. We slept there on cots that night.

Tuesday, September 6th

In the morning we could see the devastation from the wind and water. The Southern half of Slidell on Lake Pontchartrain received not only the wind and rain but was swept over by a 4 to 7 foot wave of muddy water which came in and then out but leaving in its wake a foot of foul smelling mud in homes. Many trees uprooted or just snapped off and were blown on top of and into homes. There was a long line of cars at the FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) center. After waiting in line for 1 to 2 hours, each car was instructed to open their trunk and a FEMA agent placed ice, drinking water and MREs into it. We wondered how many ran out of gas waiting. Walmart and Walgreens were open with limited hours due to the curfew. The long lines outside the stores was due to a guard at the door who controlled the number of people who entered. To prevent looting only a fixed number of people were allowed inside. Electricity was still out but power workers were on polls everywhere. Many had running water but were instructed to drink it only after boiling it. Only a few gas stations were open and had very limited supplies of gas. Cell phone communication was spotty.

DISASTER LESSON # 2 – In a disaster, communication may be cut off to the area where you are going. Have cell phones and an independent communication network of Walkie Talkie's if needed.

DISASTER LESSON # 3 – In a disaster, expect to be unable to drink the water even if it is available. Know how to disinfect it (by boiling, chlorination or filtration). Have a supply of drinking water available.

Our group divided in two. Most of our team remained in Slidell to set up the distribution center. They unloaded the semis and organized the items on tables.

Our doctors and nurses were sent to New Orleans to see if we were needed in the hospitals there. For safety reasons, we were escorted by Deputies Clayton & Kevin. They made us feel more comfortable in their all black combat uniforms and fully armed. It took almost three hours to reach Gretna where the School of Urban Missions was located. Reverend Anthony Freeman, President, was now spending all his time on relief efforts working with the Mayor of New Orleans and a council woman. Dr. Chuck Dietzen, Founder & President of the Timmy Foundation, took Rick Wolford, Director of FAME, RN, Betty Cardwell, RN, & Courtney Gorman, a gourmet baker & Mission Coordinator for Ambassadors for Children, to a nearby resident home for the elderly to conduct a clinic. The occupants of the home fared very well and for the most part only needed medications and prescriptions filled. The volunteers enjoyed hearing their stories, as they all had stayed to ride out the storm. One resident desperately wanted to contact her daughter whom she had not heard from since the hurricane and our volunteers helped to make the tearful reunion on one of their cell phones.

Dr. Larry Stevens (general surgeon), Dr. Jim Dugan (urologist) and I (gastroenterologist) went downtown to the Ochsner Clinic, an internationally known referral center. I spoke with the doctor in charge who told me that only a fraction of their medical staff of 500 was there, but since 95% of the people in the area had evacuated, the few physicians they had were sufficient. We could see the water that flooded New Orleans had come within 200 yards of the hospital. We learned that the other hospitals – Tulane, Methodist, Baptist, & Charity – were all closed due to the flooding. It was estimated that it would be at least 6 months before they could reopen. The city of New Orleans was unlike anything we had ever seen. Most vehicles in the street were police or fire and rescue vehicles. There were several convoys of National Guardsmen that came by us. Multiple helicopters were flying overhead. I had not seen that many guns in my whole life! We slept in the dorm rooms at the college which smelled bad due to the rain water that had soaked all the carpets. With little for us to do in New Orleans, we determined to return to Camp Indy in the morning.

DISASTER LESSON # 4 – To help in a disaster, follow the people and their pain. Go where they are in refugee camps, relief centers and in the homes of those who do not evacuate.

Wednesday, September 7th

Our medical team arrived back at Camp Indy midday and found it in full swing. There was a lot to do keeping the tables in the warehouse stocked due to all the people coming. More semis were arriving that needed to be unloaded. Fortunately, D J Bakken, who came with a team from Minnesota, had brought a fork lift that saved the day. Pastor Johnny and his wife were in tears that morning due to calls from many people who had trees lying on their homes and in their driveways. George Whirley, owner of N & S Tree Service in Indianapolis, and Jeff Smith, his employee, formed a crew and by the end of the day all the trees had been dealt with! The Salvation Army heard about what we were doing and set up a mobile kitchen and served over 800 hot meals daily. Our medical team was disappointed about not being able to use their medical skills more. However, we took comfort when a group of Marines were sent to our relief center to help us because they also had nothing to do in New Orleans! We were very impressed by the Marines. They never sat down, worked everywhere doing everything and were incredibly polite. One elderly man named Alex fainted in the relief center and was immediately attended to by our physicians and nurses. By the time the ambulance arrived, our medical staff had completed the history and physical and started an IV. The EMTs said they didn't usually get that kind of service. Initially, Alex didn't want to go to the hospital because of his small dog Harry who was with him. We assured him that we would take good care of Harry until he was better. Vanessa, age 12 from Minnesota who was there with her mother Heather, grandfather Reny and uncle Jamel, logged in all the people for three days – over 3500 people! She never left her post and watched over Harry at the same time. Ethan McGiven, Indianapolis Police Dept., and Jeremy Elmore, a member of Jeff's church, constructed four outside showers which were very much appreciated by all of us. Our law enforcement officers were deputized as temporary officers at the Slidell Police Department.

DISASTER LESSON # 5 – In a disaster many people want to help but don't know how. The key is leadership with an organizational plan. Set up base camp where the team can stay (with cots, bedding, food, water & showers), supplies can be distributed, & get the word out to the community about what you are doing.

DISASTER LESSON # 6 – In a disaster, expect nothing to be available. Take **everything** you need with you. Don't forget your personal medications.

That night Jeff held a camp meeting and asked everyone to share who they were, how they happen to come and their impression of what was going on. Many shared about what they had learned from the victims who came to

our the relief center. Two women shared that they had come all the way from Gulfport, Mississippi. They said we were the closest relief center!

Thursday, September 8th

More trucks arrived. It was the hottest day yet with the temperature around 90 degrees. As fast as we stocked the tables in the warehouse, everything disappeared. At Walmart and the few other stores open, only cash was accepted. No credit cards were accepted, and to make matters worse, the ATM machines were not functional. No one could get the cash they needed.

Pastor Tim Davis, Grace Assembly of God in Greenwood, Adam Grant, Purdue Student, Dave Michel, retired from the pharmaceutical industry, Mac Howard, Distribution Manager, Mike Trumpey, Garage Supervisor for Marathon Oil, Jerry Trumpey, self-employed chemical buyer, Vera Whirley, George's wife, Jake McAtee, Bart's son, and Matt Schroeder, sales manager, all made the distribution center a huge success.

DISASTER LESSON # 7 – In a disaster, you may not be able to use credit cards. Keep a supply of cash on hand.

Some lights were now coming on in some neighborhoods. Several of us loaded up a pick-up truck and went into the poorest neighborhoods in Slidell distributing food and water and telling people about the hot meals available from the Salvation Army. Many of the residents said we were the first people to come into their neighborhoods for relief. They were extremely grateful for the supplies and thanked us over and over again. Again, most of the residents we encountered had not evacuated so they had many stories to share with us, and we gladly listened. The neighborhoods had an endless number of trees down, on houses, in houses and all around the houses. In addition to the hurricane, many of these residents said they had tornadoes. Much, if not all, of the homes' belongings were piled in the front yards ruined from water and mud damage. The strong odor from the standing water throughout the neighborhoods was unbearable. That night, the Salvation Army provided us with 50 hot meals that we took back to the neighborhoods and gave to the people who did not have cars and were unable to leave their homes. Back at camp, there was no trash disposal available, so we cleared an area, fenced it in and burned the trash. Late that night another semi arrived from Minnesota. We all worked hard unloading it and restocking the warehouse.

DISASTER LESSON # 8 – Electricity is essential at the base camp. Bring portable generators & have plenty of flashlights.

DISASTER LESSON # 9 – Disaster brings confusion. Don't be confused by it. Be prepared and stick to your plan of action.

DISASTER LESSON # 10 – In a disaster, people may have lost everything, even family members. Take the time to listen. People need to tell their story. Comfort them and offer to pray with them.

DISASTER LESSON # 11 – The Church is the most effective and economical force for helping others in times of disaster. God has blessed us and enabled us to bless those in need.

DISASTER LESSON # 12 – Disasters are part of life. We will experience them. We need to be prepared at all times.

Friday, September 9th

We left at dawn for Indianapolis. The front lights on our bus were out, and we couldn't find a way to repair them. We were racing against time and the sunset. The sun was low in the sky as we crossed the Ohio River. Our bus stayed behind a semi all the way into Indianapolis. We arrived at 8:30 PM, hugged one another and said our goodbyes. The intense five day experience had changed our lives forever.

EPILOGUE

In the Book of Esther, Haman issued an edict to destroy the Nation of Israel, God's chosen people. But God used a woman named Esther to save the nation. After her parents died, a relative named Mordecai raised her as his own daughter. Esther subsequently became Persian King Xerxes' wife, but she did not reveal her Jewish ancestry. Esther risked her life by going to the king to intercede for her people because Mordecai told her, "Who knows whether you have not attained royalty ***for such a time as this?***"

Maybe you have wanted to do something to help in the aftermath of the worst disaster in our history. I encourage you to go to www.phpnetwork.org and see all the ways that you can make a difference. Will you say like Jeff Cardwell did, "Help is on the way. I will come!" Maybe God has called you "for such a time as this?"

As I write this, Camp Indy II is set to open in a small town near Biloxi, Mississippi tomorrow Monday, September 12, 2005. Also semi truck # 23 is on its way to Louisiana. When it arrives, Camp Indy will reach the milestone of providing more than 1 million pounds of relief to the victims of Hurricane Katrina!