

Volunteer Services For Katrina Victims: A Personal Story

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Abstract

This article describes the experiences of a volunteer helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina after they arrive at the Houston Astrodome. The author tells the story on how help was needed and how volunteers were of invaluable help to both the evacuees and the relief effort organizers.

Personal Experiences

Saturday morning, September 3, a Red Cross representative needed someone to walk around the Astrodome making a record of where things were so that volunteers could have a resource to answer questions from evacuees. I took on this job and went through all the levels of the Dome, noting the location of restroom facilities, men's and women's showers, food, snacks, medical triage and pharmaceutical dispensary, lost & found people, clothing distribution, baby needs, the FEMA and Social Security on-site headquarters, the phone bank (SBC is donating \$4 million per month for free long distance to help reunite displaced families), and the computer room where evacuees could access the internet for 30-minute intervals and post their names to missing-person web sites, or check those sites to see if their loved ones had posted a message. One New Orleans resident was especially anxious to use the computer. The only information she had about her mother was that she had gone to Baton Rouge to stay with relatives. She said, "I didn't even know we had relatives in Baton Rouge!"

Breakfast was being served from tables lined up around the 4th floor of the Astrodome. There were enough donuts, bagels, muffins and cereal to feed four times the number of evacuees. Cots were lined up not just on the Dome floor but around the outer perimeter on all levels. Many cots had signs posted above them listing the names of missing loved ones. It was early in the morning when I arrived and many of Houston's newest residents were still asleep, no small feat considering the frequency of announcements over the PA system.

Saturday evening I helped with clothing distribution. Boxes of clothing were arriving in a steady stream, most needing to be sorted. There were several volunteers working to organize clothing. Many of the donated boxes contained winter clothing. Someone had a pair of scissors and was cutting off the arms of long-sleeve garments. We were working at a feverish pace to finish sorting because at 8:00 p.m., other volunteers were scheduled to begin taking orders for clothing items needed. After taking the order, a runner would go to the distribution area, fill the order, then take it back to the one who placed the order. I was in charge of several large boxes of brand-new ladies' underwear, still in the package. As fast as I could open the packages, I was giving away the contents. At times there were 5-6 runners at once shouting for different sizes.

For the next two hours, clothing orders were filled and distributed at breakneck speed. In spite of the chaos, the operation ran smoothly. Unfortunately, I ran out of the smaller size panties, and then even the medium and large size underwear ran out. At 10:00 p.m. the Red Cross rep stopped the operation so the volunteers could take a break, reorganize their boxes, and begin the operation again at 10:30. I called it a night since I didn't have anything left to give away but a few packages of XXL ladies' underwear.

Sunday afternoon, September 4, there was a sign posted outside the Dome saying, "No volunteers needed until 6:00 p.m." I had seen the same sign the day before but this time I ignored it and went on in. I was wearing my wristband from the day before and had no problem gaining admission. It didn't take long to discover that the sign was correct, they really didn't need any volunteers. There were plenty of people sorting the new boxes of clothing that had come in, and there was no other apparent way to make myself useful. I waited at the staging area and talked with a young woman whose job it was to place hurricane victims with local residents offering their homes. She was elated to report that she had just placed a family of 14 with a man from California. The man had flown to Houston on his Lear jet with his teenage daughter to find a family they could help. She told me many stories of generous Houston-area residents who had opened their hearts and doors to Katrina refugees. Even while we were talking, a couple from Katy introduced themselves to her and offered rooms in their home. Another man from Austin had flown in earlier that day and set up an evacuated family in one of his vacant properties, bought them a used car, and arranged for job placement. The woman who was helping to make these connections had just been laid off and was going to have to begin looking for a job herself. In spite of her own hardship, she saw the layoff as a blessing, realizing there was no way she could have devoted as much time to this effort as she could have if she'd still been employed.

Over the PA system, there were frequent announcements that buses would be leaving for destinations including San Antonio, Austin, even Minnesota. The departure times were announced and anyone who wanted to go to that city was welcome to board that bus. With each announcement came the promise of financial assistance, job placement, and free bus transportation to the destination.

A young woman who had just arrived at the Dome asked where she could find a cot. After being processed as an evacuee, she wasn't told where she should sleep. By that time, several people had been relocated to other cities or reunited with their family members, and there were a number of empty cots both on the floor and in the hallways of the outer perimeter. After giving her direction on where to bunk, she asked where to find the medical triage area. She had been separated from her mother and other family members so she hitchhiked from Louisiana. En route to Houston she was raped. She hadn't told her mother because she didn't want her to worry. As we talked her eyes filled with tears and she said she couldn't think about her ordeal anymore because it was all so overwhelming.

All the evacuees I encountered expressed how grateful they were for the help they were receiving. At every opportunity I welcomed these new neighbors to Houston and told them how glad we are they're here.

As I waited for an assignment, I noticed a single mother who was obviously distressed. She was scheduled to go to the FEMA office on the 4th floor and didn't have anyone to watch her children, twin fourth-grade girls and a two-year-old boy. Children were not allowed on the 4th floor (I'm not

sure whether they weren't allowed up there at all or just in the FEMA office). There was a daycare center on the ground level but they wouldn't take children under age four. Everyone she asked for help referred her to someone else and she was getting desperate. I was standing nearby so I offered to watch her children while she met with FEMA. Her reaction was very emotional. She hugged me tightly as she sobbed. Quickly she introduced her children to me and left for the 4th floor. That next hour and a half was one of the longest of my life. The twin girls were as different as night and day. Nakia must have been an ADD child because she was all over the place and all over me, sitting in my lap, lying across my lap, aggravating her sister and hitting herself in the head. Kendra's behavior was the antithesis of Nakia's. She sat quietly playing with donated toys and was very polite and poised. Unfortunately, two-year-old Darren emulated Nakia's behavior instead of Kendra's. I was horrified when Nakia gave him some Play-Dough and he immediately popped it into his mouth. I had to pry his teeth open to get the Play-Dough out. My heart went out to those kids as I tried to keep them occupied. We played "I Spy" and I looked around for a book to read to Darren. A National Geographic magazine was the only available reading material, and I read an article to Darren about elephant seals but he preferred to look at the car advertisements so I read the text of the advertisements instead. Volunteers were bringing trays with dinner but Kendra, ever the compliant child, wanted to wait until she had her mother's permission to eat. Over Kendra's objection, I allowed a volunteer to deliver their dinner because it was getting late and they were obviously hungry. Their mother returned with a man she said had offered her a place to stay. I bade them all goodbye and went home exhausted.

The volunteers I've talked to all agree that their efforts helping Katrina victims has been a very rewarding time in their lives. People are grateful not only to be given assistance but to be treated with dignity and respect. If any good could come out of this hurricane, this must be it.