

Hello dear friends,

It is nearly a week since I returned home from Texas. The thoughts and feelings are finally slowing down enough to write about the experience.

In mid-October, with less than 24 hours' notice, I was headed to Austin, Texas. While at the gate in Newark airport, I looked up from my book and saw Willie Nelson ready to board my flight. I took this as a good omen, though I lacked the heart to tell him that when my gray-white hair was waist length, I once dressed as him for Halloween. Some things are best left unsaid.

By the time I arrived to the Austin shelter, it had closed. The local Red Cross chapter then gave me a car and an old map of Texas (George W. Bush was still pictured as the governor) and pointed me to Baytown, about 200 miles east of Austin.

In Baytown, I checked in at an unused hospital which doubled as both a volunteer processing center and our new home away from home. Cots were set up in the empty hospital rooms, with three to five people sharing a room and shower. The volunteers came from all over the country. I was the only one from New Jersey, at least as far as I met. Others came from Washington State, Kentucky, South Dakota, California, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and Virginia.

Each morning, we would car pool from the hospital to an abandoned Montgomery Ward store. Tables and computers were set up for a Red Cross service center. The purpose of the center was to allow Hurricane Rita and Katrina victims to apply for financial assistance. In some Texas counties, the devastation was so complete that everyone within particular zip codes were automatically given aid. For those outside these counties, applications on a case-by-case basis were taken at the Baytown service center.

Once the Red Cross supervisor realized I worked in computers for a living, I was placed in charge of a small group of computer users. We were the interim step between application and data input, ensuring that the applicant had not already received aid. We queried a database that held about 300,000 names, all hurricane victims.

After a few days in Baytown, a call came for volunteers to go to Galveston. With five others, I drove south to the gulf town. We were then sent out as three groups to visit homes in Galveston County. From processing forms of unseen applicants, I now looked into the faces and the homes of these desperate people. They were poor before Hurricane Rita, which now has basically bankrupted them.

When the state declared a mandatory evacuation, most of these people had to use rent or utility money in order to put gas in their cars. When they returned home, many found roofs fallen in and black mold taking over rooms in their houses and trailers. What little they had was now gone.

Along with another client service person, and later with a volunteer nurse on our team, we visited homes and neighborhoods to assess home damage and check on the mental and physical well-being of the families. Wherever possible, we also advised them of other agencies that could provide food, clothing and health services.

We drove through three areas of Galveston County – Galveston itself, Dickinson and Texas City on the mainland, and rural Bolivar Peninsula, which was a short ferry ride from Galveston. In all, we either spoke to or visited about 150 families. The other two teams likewise reached out to another 300 families.

Each day, for about 10 days, we went from home to home, hearing sad and courageous stories. We saw people living in unthinkable conditions, getting by as best they could and grateful for any help anyone could bring. Often, we had to inform them that their homes were unsafe, especially with the many people with asthma and breathing conditions, because of the black mold that permeated the home. Once the mold has been in place for more than 48 hours, it is impossible to remove it. You either replace the walls, ceilings or floors. Or you move. Only, these people had no place else to go, and no money with which to repair. The money given by FEMA and the Red Cross would never cover the cost. It was heart-breaking.

We met a woman who lives alone in a house already run down by other hurricanes. Rita took her front steps away, and with legs wobbly from hepatitis-C, she climbs a ladder in and out of her home. We met a couple who had a blue FEMA tarp on the roof and severe mold indoors. This is a common combination – no roof and deadly mold. While in one trailer park in Port Bolivar, a couple came running across the street, relieved at the sight of the Red Cross. Being in a rural area, they had fallen through the cracks and out of the purview of assisting agencies. The woman joked that her pack rat ways weighed her trailer down enough to keep it from blowing away. Again, ripped roof and tenacious mold.

We met neighbors looking out for neighbors. One call was to ask us to look in on a disabled friend whom no one knew was home. The friend was recovering from a stroke and pneumonia, bone thin after losing 150 pounds from the illnesses. Once a vibrant, strong construction worker, he now spends his days taking medication and retraining himself to walk and talk. Still, a smile on his face for all those who remembered him and helped him.

We met a man staying at a hotel, as his home was uninhabitable. He had a broken ankle, having fallen off his roof just before evacuation, trying to secure his home. No home, no car, no job, no ankle, and, we learned, no food. In a non-official capacity, we brought him some groceries to get him through until the food bank reopened.

We met a young woman who ran after us after we left a neighbor in her apartment building. Could we help, she asked. Her mother, an amputee from diabetes, had been sent to the hospital the night before, suffering congestive heart problems. The daughter was home alone, trying to continue with a birthday party for her younger brother. The

apartment was rife with mold. The mother's wheelchair had been stolen while they were evacuated. We brought the paperwork to the hospital for her mother to sign, and some help was on the way. Our nurse made sure a wheelchair would be provided upon the release from the hospital. This little family doing all they can in the face of nearly impossible odds.

Always, though, we were met with gratitude. People happy for kind faces, patient ears and the possibility of a few dollars to help get them by. Everyone, at least once in life, should look into the eyes of such people. Financial donations are necessary and great, but it is both profound and essential to look into the eyes of poverty, to see and feel and hear the humanity. It is not towns hurt by the hurricanes. It is people.

Toward the end of my time in Galveston, I was taking the ferry ride back from Port Bolivar on the peninsula. As became my new custom, I was out of the car and looking for the dolphins that played beside the boat. With little warning, I was overcome with despair and weeping for these people, the sadness of each day had accumulated within me.

Once back in Galveston, I walked the calming shore of the Gulf of Mexico, with a dire need to reach out to home. I did not want to burden the other volunteers, who were also experiencing their own emotional fatigue. So I called Deacon Dave Collins, my friend and spiritual guide for many years. Deacon Dave was soothing company as I strolled the beach, watching the beautiful Texan sun set into the Gulf. I will always remember Dave's gentle words of encouragement and I will always be grateful.

As my time in the south came to a close, the Red Cross had begun to shut down the services in Texas and move people to Wilma. The relentless storms of this hurricane season have really stretched the Red Cross and other agencies.

The hurricanes will subside, but the poverty will remain. I fell in love with the people of Galveston County and commit to them that I will keep a light on them. May the world never again forget these people. I will remember them. Always.