

BAY TOWN BLUES – 30 Days in a Red Cross Shelter

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“When you got nothing, it’s enough to have someone smiling down on me.”

Journal – Day one

*After a stormy, unsettling flight from Seattle to Houston, airport terminal confusion reigns as I join a group of Red Cross volunteers from throughout the country to figure out our next steps. Two hours later, we join a hundred other workers in a darkened Coca-Cola administrative building in Houston for our first restless night on a cot. None of us knows for sure what tomorrow will bring.*

It's almost ten pm and eighty plus men, women, and children prepare to spend another night sleeping head to toe in a small gym in Baytown, Texas. The glaring light are cut off as this extemporaneous gathering of humanity exhales and readies itself for the ensuing night of snoring, hacking, crying, and all that defines people in a restless state of slumber. Life in the Red Cross shelter in Baytown, Texas presses on.

Journal – Day Two

*The next day, we report to the Houston Chapter Red Cross head quarters where incoming volunteers are deployed to various shelters or support stations throughout the region. Along with three others, I'm assigned to the Lee High Annex Shelter in Baytown. There are eighty eight "clients" staying at this deserted school being monitored by a staff*

Page 2

*of very tired Red Cross volunteers. After checking in, we head off to clean the church where this group was staying before being moved to the current quarters. We also seek out a corner or a closet to setup our cots for the night.*

Hurricane Ike had passed over this town a month previous and this was the only manageable living alternative for these homeless Americans. None were homeless by choice. Each has his own story, but the story line was similar for all. Strong winds, a tidal surge and a deluge, overwhelmed them all and converted their housing and belongings to soggy messes. None had the resources and deep pockets needed to find alternatives within the community to effectively relocate.

Journal – Day Three

*I'm assigned to the two pm to ten pm shift helping oversee shelter operations, serve meals, cleanup and maintain security. I get my first taste of working with people playing out their lives in a confined space. They are sleeping elbow to knee in the school gym. Eighty eight people are sharing four bathrooms and two showers. There are no showers for the staff, but we are given the opportunity to clean up at a nearby 24 Hour Fitness Center. I begin to learn people's stories.*

For some, tornado quality winds tore roofs off their homes or apartments leaving structures and possessions exposed to heavy rains. For others, salt water flushed inland and then out and took away or damaged anything of value. Trees crushed houses, tipped

Page 3

over trailers or landlocked boats serving as homes. What remained were the piles of debris and ruin familiar to all who have observed scenes of Katrina and other water borne disasters of the past.

Journal – Day Four

*I begin to learn about the details of Hurricane Ike and its collision with people's lives in Coastal Texas and Louisiana.*

*1.4 million initially homeless during the storm, 37,000 permanently displaced in Galveston alone.*

*40,000 buildings with roof and other damage; leading to the installation of a projected 26,000 temporary blue tarps.*

*241 Red Cross shelters established throughout the region at a height of operations with 6,000 workers.*

*300 bodies recovered to date in Galveston.*

All of the clients living in the shelter had arrived via stays in at least two other shelters scattered throughout Texas. Now they were, at least, in their home community looking to rebuild their lives. For some, all that they owned could be contained in a variety of plastic bags and boxes. There were seventeen family groupings, five of which had children of all ages. The rest were single adults. They were black, white, and Hispanic. Several lived in wheelchairs, several were developmentally disabled, and many had medical issues or exceptional mental health problems. One couple was deaf. At night,

Page 4

others would camp out nearby and come in for a hot meal, bathroom, and access to phones.

Journal – Day Five

*This is my first day as “supervisor” of the afternoon shift. I am able to calm an angry couple who had arrived at the shelter looking for food and shelter, but had been denied services since they are not storm victims. They had come down from Oklahoma looking for reconstruction work, but had no luck. I helped them by listening, getting them a meal, and some cash for gas.*

All shelter residents display indications of stress, sleeplessness, and a malaise known only to those who have lost everything and are forced into collective living for the purposes of safety, sanitation, food, and what support they can get from their community and the Red Cross. Names and circumstances started becoming familiar.

#### *Journal – Day Six*

*I made three clients cry today. The first was a little girl who kept wandering away from her mother to play alone and I enforced a Red Cross policy that dependent children always are in the presence of their parents or guardians. The second was a woman living in a wheel chair that I had asked to move locations. She demonstrated a reality of shelter living that people become territorial and protective of their space. The third*

Page 5

*meltdown involved a developmentally disabled client who was hysterical over her missing boyfriend. I was learning about the emotional physics of people on the edge.*

There was Jerry and Mike, both Vietnam vets, and both with exceptional medical problems. Mike had lost his trailer on the Bolivar Peninsula. Jerry couldn't return to his condemned low income housing complex. There was ten year old Nasha and her family. With no car, a baby in tow, and pushing grandmother in a wheel chair, they walked miles each day chasing FEMA applications, Small Business Administration applications (a new hurdle to surpass to qualify for reconstruction monies), trying to find food stamps, health clinics and other stop gap measures of low income American survival. There was Mucs and Patrick, roommates before the storm leveled their house, now single males trying to get by with pickup work from local contractors doing cleanup work or installing blue tarps on damaged roofs. Neither had been paid in several weeks in what appeared to be a different kind of deluge of fly-by-night outfits cashing in on a preexisting sea of misery.

Journal – Day Ten

*Today brings adults breaking down, many tears and much anger with the obstacles and red tape involved in dealing with FEMA and other agencies. Anxiety was ramped up as the shelter was put on 'lock down' due to the presence of a man with a rifle in the area. Our hot food was delivered in Red Cross vehicles. They were late today, causing a mild panic amongst the staff and clients. A donated TV blares constantly, with Texas football the crowd favorite.*

Page 6

Add in Rosetta, a seventy something woman who would arise at four in the am and return at nine at night after a day of work in an entry level job in addition buses to FEMA service stations, trying to pull her resources together to rebuild her home. She, like

others, actually had vouchers from FEMA to stay in local hotels until October twenty eighth, but there were no rooms available in the region. Most were occupied by reconstruction workers coming in from elsewhere, while others were 'unavailable' to hurricane victims due to bias and other unspoken barriers.

Standing in support of the clients was a cadre of Red Cross volunteers from throughout the nation. These Mass Care workers, as they are classified within Red Cross, consisted of shelter workers, mental health workers, nurses, case workers, security personnel, and food drivers. Behind this cadre of frontline workers was another layer of centrally located Red Cross administrators, technicians, dispatchers, warehouse workers, and others needed to bolster the sheltering and feeding operations.

Journal – Day Twelve

*The eight hour days are turning into twelve hour days because of the turnover of Red Cross workers and elevating demands of shelter life. Police were called in to monitor tension between a mother in the shelter and the estranged father of her children living in his car. Everyday life issues become acute as the ordeal continues. This includes a screaming match between two families over the rightful possession of several hair dryers.*

Page 7

A major resource for all is the presence of the Southern Baptist Convention and its army of volunteers. Their mission is to setup and operate food distribution centers throughout the region during emergencies. They are so well organized that they can deploy

anywhere across the country in less than four hours and be serving meals within a day. Their operations are an inspiration in efficiency and harmony and are staffed by adults sixty and older. By the end of October, they had prepared and served over 700,000 meals in the Baytown area alone.

Journal – Day Eleven

*I've begun to observe high levels of patience and frequent acts of kindness among the shelter inhabitants. Anonymous gifts show up for children. 'Outside food', such as pizzas, is shared. Rides are provided, as needed, using the few vehicles owned by the clients. Despite the odds stacked against them, the residents of Lee Annex Shelter exhibit inspired levels of human decency.*

In the three weeks I was there, no insurance companies showed up to assist any of these Hurricane Ike storm victims. They were on their own to try and navigate the web of complications involved in dealing with FEMA and other serving agencies. Verizon had generously set up a bank of landlines outside the facility which aided those who did not own cell phones or had to spend hours 'on hold' waiting to speak to a FEMA or other agency representatives. This willingness to persevere despite monumental obstacles was a testimony to the human spirit.

Page 8

Journal – Day Thirteen

*A change of managers has occurred, and along with it the climate of the Shelter. The initial manager's strength, mainly because of his military history, was setting up and*

*organizing shelters under difficult conditions. His temperament was not designed for shelter maintenance, the demanding undertaking of overseeing a random group of people under trying conditions over an extended period of time. In came Doris, by trade the Executive Director of a domestic violence shelter in Florida. This was her cup of tea and it showed in her management style. Hamstringing her eventually was a mandate to move clients out of the shelter. Being 'on' for sixteen hours a day and juggling overtired shelter workers added to her burden. By the end of her month long stint, she exhibited the 'thousand yard stare' common to exhausted people immersed in challenging situations.*

Sheila's story- Sheila was from Baytown, but had ridden out the hurricane at her uncle's place across I-10 to the east. She described the tempest that besieged her town as sounding like a 'dadgum train'. Their lights had gone out at six pm and the storm hit with a passion at midnight. She remembered lots of tree borne debris and standing water as she made her way to a shelter near Fort Worth. From there, she bounced back to the Wooster Baptist Church in Baytown, even though there was no power or running water. The Red Cross was operating with generators and imported water at this point. After a week, Wooster closed down and she landed at the Lee Annex Shelter.

Page 9

Throughout all this, Sheila was trying to qualify for FEMA support. HUD was also involved, but couldn't move forward without FEMA approvals. Her home had been destroyed, so she was having trouble coming up with the Proof of Ownership and Proof

of Residency in Baytown. As with others, she couldn't use her FEMA hotel voucher because there were no rooms, and if there were, the hotels wanted all of their money up front. Sheila had little money, so she couldn't foot the bill.

According to Sheila, the "best, safest place" for her was the Red Cross shelter. But time was running short. There would be an end to Red Cross services. For Sheila and others like her, "being optimistic" and persistent did battle with depression, discouragement, and anxiety.

Journal – day Fifteen

*After a day off, I return to the Shelter and am asked to step up as the interim Shelter Manager. New Red Cross case workers have arrived and are working feverishly to help the clients find living alternatives to the shelter. We are down to forty four clients at this point, but this too many considering the impending closure of the shelter. The Red Cross will not leave anyone on the street upon closing, but finding alternatives is proving to be a daunting task.*

A fight breaks out between a single male and the father of two small children who have adjacent cots. The surface issue is the noise and havoc of children at play in a confined

Page 10

space. The reality is that frayed nerves, tension, and deep seated frustrations are playing themselves out in the most human of ways. Some clients spend the day in their cots with covers over their heads. Others stare at the TV over in the corner. Many go outside

repeatedly for smokes and a change of scenery. Children become hysterical or introverted. Our mental health workers are working overtime. In fact, the strain on mental health workers in disaster scenarios is so great that the Red Cross will only deploy them for two weeks at a time, as opposed to many more weeks for other types of volunteers.

*Journal – Day Seventeen*

*I've discovered that I really enjoy most aspects of temporary shelter management even though the hours are long and quick solutions for problems are few. I'm not necessarily trained for this beyond related work that I've done in my professional life, but nonetheless, I blindly take it on with the help from other experienced shelter workers and a personal mandate to see this through.*

Shelter life has become a waiting game – waiting in line for various services and resources to materialize, waiting for meals, waiting for your turn in the shower, waiting for control of your life once again. We all know each other a bit too well. The children seem best at taking it one day at a time, finding ways to amuse themselves despite their lives being up side down. They leave for school daily, but face the ignominy of being bused to and from a homeless shelter.

Page 11

*Journal – Day Eighteen*

*The announcement has finally come on the closing date of the shelter. The Red Cross has fulfilled its mission and will assist one and all in pursuing their next steps. This is, of*

*course, easier said than done, so the pressure on the entire shelter staff has been ramped up. FEMA, fortunately, is finally coming through for some clients, along with some community based services in Baytown that have come back on line.*

With the Shelter closing and people moving on, there are goodbyes every several hours now. These are heart wrenching scenes because people have bonded and become close. Some people are moving on to only slightly better circumstances such as hotels or barely habitable homes. Others have found apartments or trailers but face the many complications of rebuilding their lives under continually trying circumstances. These are displaced human beings and few are returning to anything resembling their previous neighborhoods, friends, and familiar support systems. Everything is left or right of center for these people with few prospects of finding a peaceful place in the middle.

Postscript:

Wire services reported on November 8, 2008 that the head of FEMA met with Texas officials to deal with the continuing slowness of the FEMA housing initiatives for Hurricane Ike victims, especially mobile homes for the tens of thousands damaged or destroyed by the storm.