

Katrina Cleanup - A first hand experience

by Leif Penrose

This last week I went to Mississippi this week to help in the aftermath of Katrina. After I left, I thought my experience might help others to better understand the scope and how they might help more efficiently when sending goods.

Monday evening, (7 days after Katrina) I traveled to Lumberton, Mississippi arriving at 3:00 AM. I claimed a picnic table for a bed and slept on it every night but one. There were no mosquitoes (I don't know why). I had taken a sleeping pad, pillow and blanket. Fortunately for me and the relief effort, it hasn't rained once since Katrina passed. Lumberton is just off I-59 about 25 miles south of Hattiesburg, MS, and about 45 miles from the gulf. Our church has a disaster relief agency and they had organized at Bass Memorial Academy (BMA). They were serving the people of Lumberton and Purvis, Mississippi. The relief effort there consisted of sending teams into the community to remove trees and do basic cleanup, provide two hot food kitchens (1 at BMA and 1 in Purvis), and provide a central distribution site for relief supplies sent to that area. All needs for that county were referred to the organization through the sheriff's office, city police and FEMA.

I took along tools for roofing and cutting trees. I spent all day Tuesday at an elementary school, cutting up a two acre pile of pine trees that looked like a stack of 80-foot pick up sticks. It was a one-person job because the trees were stressed from their falling, and every cut ended with the bent trees and pieces jumping, popping and twisting back. We couldn't take a risk of having someone else hit when the other person released a tree. By the end of the day all of the dangerous trees were flat on the ground. It was close to 30 trees that had to be made "Safe – for routine chainsaw work". Others came in on subsequent days, cut into shorter lengths and hauled off the remains. The elementary school wasn't so lucky. Roof about 25% missing (Meaning you could see daylight from inside) with a total loss of ceiling, insulation, carpet, desks and 80% loss of books. It was heartbreaking to see the stack of wet books in front of the school. At the end of the Tuesday I was amazed to see that the line of relief products that I'd seen that morning was almost totally gone. What had seemed like a mountain of materials, diapers, canned food, dry goods, water, hygiene products etc. Tuesday morning had been distributed by Tuesday afternoon. The people started to line up at 7:00 AM and the last person came through at 6:00 PM and the line was never empty. The hot food service served over 4,000 meals between the two sites Tuesday. The organizers told us they expected to distribute the next day but didn't know where the supplies would come from. After a cold shower and supper I saw a UPS Semi from Vermont roll in. It took 40 of us and a hyster driver two hours to unload the 100 thousand pounds of materials that came in that one truck. 50 Tons of supplies and by the next day most of it was gone. Nine hours of chainsaw and 2 hours of unloading a Semi and that picnic table was a welcome site.

Also, an advance team went on Tuesday to find out if they could get into the city of Waveland, Mississippi. Waveland is on the coast about 15 miles east from the Louisiana/Mississippi border. From what I was able to see it was one of the hardest hit cities as the eye hit at the border and the winds are supposed to be the worst to the east of the eye. They showed us pictures Tuesday before bed and assigned some to go set up a site at a flooded out Fred's Supermarket across the street from the Waveland water

tower and Police Department. The Waveland PD had decided to wait out the storm in the office, and they did until the water washed them out of the building. Two of the officers locked arms around each other and a bush and held on for two hours until the water receded enough for them to escape.

Wednesday I went into Lumberton and Purvis. The majority of the immediate cleaning of dangerous and road blocking trees was already done with only the worst left on the roofs. The first two places we went to, needed a crane or bucket to get the trees off so we had to defer. But after that, we started to find folks who had evacuated and had not returned when the initial cleanup was done and so still had roofs to be cleared. We had a team of four men with chainsaws and 10 high school students who would haul away. We worked until 7:00 PM. A similar story again with relief trucks showing up from all over the country and about the same number of people fed. (There were 150 high school students in total from Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia and Florida assisting at our site every day). The food kitchen from Purvis was moved to Waveland on Wednesday. Because of military curfew we had to leave before dark.

Thursday I was asked to go to Waveland with about 40 of the students. The food service and food distribution was being organized in conjunction with the Florida Highway Patrol, Army, National Guard and our group. This was now 9 days after Katrina. Residents who had left were not being allowed back in. Only those who had snuck in or stayed were there when we set up. We had to pass through checkpoints where men with M-16s looked our group over and asked what we were doing. On the drive down we saw more and more destruction. The media is not exaggerating. Imagine a Georgia tornado that's 75 miles wide and travels 50 miles. The water had come in 15 to 20 feet above ground level and it was Mississippi delta swamp muck. There was not one house in 100 that was not damaged. Those that survived had 1 to 2 feet of muck left when the waters receded. There was no need for chainsaws. Any house that was still standing will need to be bull dozed. There will be no recovery from the muck. The EPA would not let us sweep the parking lot where we set up the food distribution because of the contaminants in the dried muck. The parking lot had been scraped (probably on Sunday) and then after it had dried a few days we were allowed to set up. We were told to always wear our gloves and to thoroughly clean every wound immediately. There were piles of suspected asbestos from the ceilings of the old shopping center that the HP officers cordoned off with police tape. The smell that would occasionally come with a breeze from inside the grocery store would turn your stomach. Nothing had been cleaned out and the rotting foods and Mississippi mud was all still wet, because the sun couldn't dry out the inside of the store. Hundreds of cars that had been washed around were lining the roads (the road crews had simply fork-lifted them off the road surface). I had to drive around a frame house that was still intact but now was relocated into the road from it's foundation 100 yards away. I saw a U-Haul truck sitting up on a fence post. It had floated there and then perched when the waters went down. There were Semi Trailers washed into people yards. By the time we got there Thursday morning the people had come and started to get what they needed but had destroyed the organization that had been accomplished Wednesday. You couldn't blame them, , , they are desperate and in need and there was no one there to keep it organized. We spent 4 hours organizing and got a supply line going well for a couple of hours and then had to leave for curfew. I spent almost my entire day working a pallet jack. About an hour before we quit the Forklift operator gave me a lesson and said go for it, he had to leave that night for home. Curfew was still in effect but we could have stayed within our site , , except that I had riders with me who depended on me to get

them back to base as they were not as self contained as I was (and weren't amused with the idea of just sleeping outside)

The local people had nothing. On more than one occasion we had a person throw, drop or discard their keys..... they didn't need them anymore because they had no house and no car. A lady came and asked a worker (Rita) for Poligrip. She was almost out and couldn't eat without her teeth. Rita couldn't find any but told her to come back the next day. When she returned on Thursday still no Poligrip but Rita asked her to wait while she looked through a hygiene box that had toothpaste. In that box was one tube of Poligrip. They both cried when it was found. On Friday afternoon I saw one of our workers a grown man, Dana crying openly as he walked around at the end of the day mumbling repeatedly "these people have so much loss".

The real heart breaker and eye opener to me was the way the supplies came in. Those that were organized on pallets and into specific commodities (with shrink wrap) were the best. The absolute worst was mixed boxes that were stacked into a semi – not on pallets. We could off load a pallet and put it in a distribution line in a few moments with a fork lift. The boxes had to be manually lifted and then volunteers had to sort into the distribution line. This was very, very time consuming. The worst heartbreak is the clothes. Imagine a garage sale where you just took all of your clothes and put them in a heap. There are not enough volunteer workers to sort the clothes. And then the people who need them have to dig through and once you dig and find an item you don't fold it nice and say "not my size, style, color" and place it back nice and neat. No it's hot and you're looking for some underwear because you haven't changed yours in 9 days. So the people are not careful with what has been sorted. Our group sorted about half of what came to us. Then mid afternoon we saw that other relief organizations were bringing their clothing donations and dumping beside our site. I stopped one of them and asked what was going on and they said, "We don't have the man power to deal with clothes and FEMA told us to bring it here" The heartbreak is this, , , the people need it, , the organization want them to have it, , , but practically there is not enough people to sort and organize it. When I left today there was a stack of clothing 5 feet high, 100 feet long and 50 feet wide, , , unsorted on the ground. It made us sick but we simply could not sort it and it came mixed with the other loads. Loads that were only clothing were turned away. But loads that had food and hygiene products would be accepted and the clothing placed in the "Clothing Area" ...unsorted. The people would leave with bags of clothing but it just made you sick to know that the people had given and it had arrived but there wasn't a way to do it right. Clothing still in the wrappers were fine (like a 3 pack of men's underwear) and pallets that were pre-sorted with a box attached were okay. But a garbage bag with clothes in it, ...another story

Friday, I returned to Waveland and we had the same opening story, not quite as bad though except that after we left more trucks arrived. It only took a couple of hours to get the organization back and I spent the day unloading trucks with a fork lift. We had two fork lifts and a pallet jack that unloaded all day, truck after truck after truck but the area where we put the supplies never seemed to get full. The people came as quick as the supplies came. The Highway Patrol, Army, National Guard and some of our crew started taking trucks into the side streets and out into the country so we also started loading vehicles as well as unloading trucks. Lunch finally came at 5:00 PM and Supper was at 10:00 PM. There were two of us who stayed in Waveland Friday evening and were busy unloading trucks, getting fuel for generators and preparing for the next day. We ran both forklifts until the propane was gone and then scrounged a tank for one from

somewhere (might have been liberated). The last truck I unloaded was from Gordon County Georgia (EMS, Sheriff, and Police). I recognized at least one of the officers who accompanied the Mohawk Tractor trailer and helped off load.

Saturday morning started before sunrise, organizing the distribution center, setting up the meal area, waiting for the rest of the workers to come back from Lumberton. I was on the fork lift as the sun came up and didn't stop until I left at noon. It'll take me most of the day Sunday to be ready for classes Monday...The desk is a mess and the end of the quarter is this week.

Although people are complaining about the slow response (and it was slow) I saw trucks bringing supplies from almost every state in the country. It is pouring in now. I repeatedly heard people say, "No, I just need this much...save the rest for someone else who needs it more than me". We are a resilient people. Our very psyche will not allow us to see our fellow mankind suffer and even more so if they are fellow Americans. It may take years to rebuild some areas but not as long as you might expect if you had seen the damage I saw. As I left Saturday Afternoon I counted one convoy of out of state utility vehicles from one company 50 trucks long. I saw at least 25 identical mobile homes being taken down I-59 and when I left you could get Pizza Hut in Purvis and McDonalds in Gulf Port.

I'll try to find a good way to let people see the pictures.

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