

RAYS OF LIGHT THROUGH THE STORM

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The following narrative describes the author's two-week experience as a volunteer at a shelter in Texas.

I had never been away from my family before, especially for a long time. After seeing the devastation on television, I felt a strong desire from God to go to help out, medically, in some way. I was praying about it in my car one morning on my way to church. A song was playing on the radio; the verse said, "I want to be your hands. I want to be your feet. I'll go where you send me. Go where you send me." At that very moment, God's presence was so strong that I knew what I was supposed to do.

October 4, 2005

I finally made it to Austin, Texas. I took a shuttle to the headquarters where I checked in. The people at the headquarters were so nice. I had a lot of paper work to fill out, but they were so helpful. I spoke with a nurse and a doctor who were doing the health service check-in area. When they told me that I would have a car, I freaked out! I told them that I get lost very easily, but they reassured me that I would have good directions and cell phone for use while volunteering in my assigned area, San Antonio, Texas.

I was in awe when she asked me where I worked. I told her I was a diabetic educator at a pharmacy. She gave me a funny look, grabbed a piece of paper, and showed me that the area I was going had a diabetic clinic. WOW! How unreal was that! I would be working with diabetics; hundreds of miles away from home and I would be doing what I was comfortable with. This was definite affirmation that I was where the Lord wanted me to be. I checked in at the nurse's area for

a health check-in. An older nurse working there told me she wished she could go with me to San Antonio so she could work directly with patients. She felt that the job she was doing was very boring, but I told her she was there for a reason. That made her feel a little bit better. She wished me luck and then it was time for me to leave.

I was very nervous about driving in a strange area and got turned around a few times and found I was heading east instead of west. What a big goof I am! I just learned to laugh at myself with each mistake I made.

October 5, 2005

I did it again! Most of the drive to San Antonio was a straight shot. Once I arrived in San Antonio, I had to pull over and call someone for directions to the shelter. I would be working at Kelly Air Force Base, and, once again, I got lost trying to find my way to it. When I finally arrived, I was shocked. There was a trailer in the middle of the parking area, with hundreds of people in line. I later found out that this was where the bank and the post office were. Most of the people at the shelter were Katrina evacuees. Almost everyone had on a backpack. It was very sad to see all of the children roaming around. When I entered the building, I was scanned by a security officer and went in through the main entrance, only to find out that there was a different entrance for volunteers. I had to walk through the sleeping area to get to where I needed to go: there were hundreds of cots and personal belongings were everywhere. I found out later that FEMA had provided the evacuees with some money, which some people used to buy

televisions. You would see a bunch of the evacuees sitting together watching someone else's television.

In the diabetic clinic, I worked with Deb, a registered nurse who was a great resource for me, as she has her certification in diabetes education. The clinic had lots of meters, lancets, and a refrigerator full of insulin that had been donated by different companies. The name of each client that received supplies was listed in a notebook. I was able to meet a few of the people, and one of my favorite clients was Elmo. He was hard of hearing and did not wear his hearing aid that often, but he was a very sweet man. He was frustrated because his blood sugars had been in the upper 200's to 300's. He was afraid that the 300 would put him into a coma and would say, "I don't like that, they need to do something for me." He had just been to another clinic for a doctor's appointment, but the doctor didn't make any changes in his insulin dose, so was very frustrated and afraid he would get sicker. Deb led him to another medical clinic, but the only thing offered was to have a doctor see him. He got angry and said that if they didn't help him, he would just forget it—he would not take any medicine at all. Deb was able to convince him to go to see the doctor. Later on that day he came back to see us. The doctor changed his insuline dosage for him, and this made him feel much better. I can't imagine going through all of the hassles the evacuees would go through just to receive the medical care that they needed.

October 6, 2005

This day was quite an interesting one for me. To begin with, I again got lost on my way to the shelter. I began a collection of all of the directions that people have given to me and was learning to laugh at myself. Upon arrival at the diabetic clinic, I was able to meet some of my clients. One lady named Barbara really touched my heart. She called us her "snow bunnies" and she was known as "brown

sugar." She always had a huge smile on her face and did a little dance for us in the morning. That day she found out that she would be flying to California first-class on October 12, the day after her birthday, to see her son. This would be a birthday that she would always remember.

I also met a lady who was just diagnosed with Type II diabetes. She was very nervous about the diagnosis, and hated the thought of poking her finger every day. She called me the "blood sucking nurse." I told her that I would work with her and teach her to be able to check her own blood sugar levels before too long, which I hoped would relieve some of her anxiety about poking her finger.

Near the end of the day I had some down time. I noticed an older woman sitting with her two sons and I went over to talk with them. They were from New Orleans. Right after the storm they were all separated; the older son was at another shelter and it took a few days until they were reunited. They told me they planned on going back to New Orleans. One son was a security guard, and he told me over and over that he was excited to get back to work because he loved his job. Both brothers were in wheelchairs. The younger son had a stroke at a very young age. He slept the entire time I spoke with them. To be able to see them together as a family really blessed me. They thanked God that they were back together and were doing ok.

October 7, 2005

Today the diabetic clinic was moved to a medical clinic. I felt a lot safer there because they had police officers outside of the door. One officer joked with me and said, "Yell loud if you need us so that we can run away." I told him, "Thanks! I feel really safe."

I worked from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. It was so busy that I didn't even get a break. We saw over 40 people. Some of the people were workers, and a lot of people were having

sinus and cold symptoms. Faye, a very tiny lady—she weighed about 90 pounds—came to the clinic to receive all of her medications. We kept them for her because when she kept them on her own, she took too many at a time. She had a psychiatric history: she may have been tiny but she sure was mighty! Another nurse I worked with (not a very compassionate nurse) did not get along with Faye, who swore at her and told me she couldn't stand her, although Faye and I got along really well. She told me the story of her evacuation during the hurricane. She is hearing impaired and had a little dog who was her hearing aid dog. During the storm, she was thrown all about. She showed me all of the bruises on her legs and arms. She said there were other dogs all over the place fighting with each other. She told me that when they came to rescue her, they took her little dog and threw him out of the way. She was so upset that her dog was gone. She had to spend a few days in the hospital in the ICU area and only remembered a little bit about those days.

During the day a nice lady from Louisiana who'd been living with her sister came in for a prescription voucher. At one point her brother had been missing and she thought he might have been stranded on a boat. Eventually she met up with her sister-in-law, and soon they were all united again. She joked with her sister-in-law and said, "We have no home, no job, and no possessions. We are the 'ya ya homeless sisters!'" I laughed and let her know how impressed I was that she was able to keep her sense of humor during a time like this. She came back later with some pictures of her mother's house. Her mother lived near where the levy broke, and the media hadn't shown anything compared to what these pictures showed. Her refrigerator was turned over; the ceilings and walls were caved in; her new large screen TV was ruined; mold was everywhere. Then she showed me a picture of her bedroom, where everything was

still intact! The bed was made, nothing was out of place. In the same picture was an outline of what appeared to be a woman with a pink scarf on. It was the most bizarre picture I have ever seen.

October 8, 2005

This morning I had an opportunity to work with a nurse practitioner named Terry. We really clicked and worked well together. A new group of nurses began to come in today for work. I was amazed at some of their attitudes. They only wanted to work in certain areas at certain times.

My biggest frustration has been the organization. Until then I hadn't had a supervisor. No one had any idea how many people we had seen or if we had any suggestions to make things run easier. I felt that when new nurses come in, someone should be there to greet them and show them around the facility. I also thought it would have been nice to have one person in each zone available to report in to and talk to with any concerns or issues. The volunteers come and go, and there is no way of checking to see how long they worked or if they even showed up to work. I saw many people abuse their volunteer time. To me, being a volunteer means you go where you are told and do whatever work is needed.

Today a man came into the clinic complaining of athlete's foot. He told me he was an evacuee from Hurricane Katrina and told me an amazing story. The water was coming in very quickly and as he was trying to escape he saw some elderly women holding on tightly to doorknobs so that they wouldn't drown. He knew he had to save them. He was able to get a boat and went back to get them. He was able to get them in the boat and saved their lives. They were all placed in a shelter but the women had since been able to get their own place. He said that they came back to the shelter to visit him; that they were all doing well and thanked God

for him. This man was so humble! He said that he just wanted to go to church and be able to praise the Lord for all that the Lord had done for him. When he left, I spoke with Terry. I got pretty choked up and told her I felt so selfish after meeting all of these people. I've always let the little things in life bother me.

October 11, 2005

All the evacuees have amazed me. They always bring me such joy. A man came into the clinic today complaining of foot trouble. He told me that he'd been stranded in brown water for four days, having to move dead bodies out of the way while swimming. He was finally air lifted to safety.

A family that came in to the clinic today really blessed me. They had two children, ages 12 and 14. The mother was having an asthma attack and had run out of her inhaler. When Terry listened to her lungs, she could hear wheezing. She asked the woman if she wanted to go to the hospital where they would probably give her a breathing treatment, some medications, and then send her home. She would have to pay out of pocket and then FEMA would reimburse them. It would probably cost about \$130.00. They chose to wait until the morning.

One of the biggest frustrations was trying to lead people in the right direction for their medications. At one time they would go to the clinic for vouchers to be able to get medications filled. The nurse would fax a form to the pharmacy, the pharmacy would fax it back to us with the cost of the medication, then the client would receive permission to go to have it filled. Since then the procedure has changed. Clients were to go to another building to have the paperwork filled out. Clients were returning to us and telling us that they were no longer doing the prescriptions. People were getting very angry and upset! They had no idea how to get the medications filled. These people had been through so much! A lot of the people needed cardiac,

hypertension, respiratory, and diabetic prescriptions filled. Some of the people had gone days and weeks without getting their medications.

October 12, 2005

Today was an emotionally draining and frustrating day. The system for the evacuees was adding more stress to their lives than they needed. People continued to come to us for medication vouchers. We had to tell them to go to another building where FEMA was to get the voucher for them. They were being told that they would have to pay for the medications up front and that FEMA would reimburse them. Most of the people didn't have the funds available. A man came to the clinic who had a tooth extracted. He was unable to get his medication filled because a number was missing for the D.E.A., and the pharmacy was unable to read the dentist's name. I tried to call for him but the dental clinic had already closed for the day. He would have to wait until the morning. How frustrating! It did not seem fair that these people were going through these problems on a basis.

Miss Rosalyn came to visit me today. She hadn't been in for a few days and was very depressed over all she'd been through. She had been to mental health. I was able to spend some time with her. I kept telling her that God loves her and would help her through this. I blew her a kiss as she was leaving. She stopped and said, "I love you Miss Terri." I told her that I loved her too.

October 13, 2005

Today was a pretty slow day but we were able to spend more time with the residents. I have really grown to love Elmo. In conversation with him, I found out that his father was a preacher. He knew the Bible quite well. Elmo shared his story of the hurricane with us. He said that his family tried to get him to go with them but he told them

no. The water was coming in quickly and kept getting higher and higher. He cried "God please help me!" He then saw a light. The light led him out. He said that someone appeared to him and said, "I have been sent by God for you." The man had a boat. He got into the boat and lay in the bottom. He hadn't had his insulin or other medications for a few days and was very weak. He was unsure if the person was going to hurt him or not. He was safely lifted by air to a hospital for treatment. He hadn't eaten for a few days and had not been able to take his insulin. He said his blood sugar was okay but that his blood pressure was very high. Elmo is an amazing man.

October 15, 2005

Today was another slow day. FEMA was about to take over the shelter, so we had to pack up our supplies. Half of the supplies were to be sent to the Red Cross; the other supplies would stay with FEMA. My friend Elmo came in for his medication. He pointed at me and gave me a huge smile! He wasn't sure if he would see me again. My time volunteering was almost over. That was the last day that I ever saw Elmo. I miss him—I often wonder where he chose to live.

Another man came into the clinic for some Tylenol and shared his story with me. He told me he had never gone swimming before, and as the water was coming in, he called out to God. He told me that God had given him the ability to swim when he needed it. He was in the water for quite a few days. He slept on the tops of cars and held on to the door handles. In the morning he would continue to swim until he hit land. He told me he swam over barbed wire, past cats, dogs, even snakes. He was so thankful to be alive.

October 16, 2005

Today I had to be processed out. It was my last day in San Antonio and I was ready to leave. I missed my family, but I would also miss the amazing people I met. The people that checked me out of the shelter were very rude to me. They told me I would have to return my car to the airport. I told them that I was not going to do that, that I had been told of construction that was going on, and that I get turned around so easily that I didn't want to risk missing my flight home because of detours. They kept telling me it was my responsibility. I again asked them to please keep the car because, after all, it was one less day they would have to pay for it. Finally, after speaking with my supervisor and making me feel horrible, they agreed. I also had to turn in my credit card. The Red Cross gave each volunteer a credit card with \$500.00 on it. I had almost \$200.00 left on mine and I'd been there for two weeks. Some volunteers actually asked for more money. Some were spending the money on drinking. I think there should have been more rules on how to spend the money, but one of the supervisors from San Antonio said she didn't care if people used it for drinking. This was money that people had donated to help those that were in need!

I have no regrets about going to Texas to help. It was an experience that I will never forget!

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