

STORMY WEATHER AND PERSONAL CHOICES: HURRICANES KATRINA-RITA

Marie Webber, M.H.S.A. Student, University of Michigan

This narrative details a grad-student's experience volunteering for the Red Cross during Hurricane Rita. The author and twelve other volunteers were temporarily forgotten about by the very agency that dropped them off at their assigned destination—a roller-rink-turned shelter—causing them to draw upon resources that none of them knew they had during their three-week assignment.



The author, Marie Webber

Before Hurricane Katrina, I had just moved back to Michigan after a year of post baccalaureate work in Hawaii. I moved back to be closer to my family because it was tough to maintain the close relationship from four thousand miles away. I grew up in a very loving and compassionate family, always volunteering to coach soccer, work overtime life guarding, and planning YMCA camps in my youth. My academic and new professional career seemed promising; however, reflecting on this complacency something was missing from my life. I had been accepted into a graduate program in the School of Public Health at the University of

Michigan. The same week the storm hit, I was offered a full time job. Upon accepting, I told them that I would not be able to start for three weeks.

I had called the local shelter the day after the storm and left a few messages to find out how I could help. There was no guarantee that I would be deployed after being trained with the Red Cross, nor did I think I would be assigned to go to Louisiana. After watching the storms and the suffering on television, there was not a second thought in my mind about going to help in some way. The compelling desire and passion to help out those in need was what I needed to spark life from my mundane complacency. At this point in my life,

I had the freedom to decide what was important to me. I could not think of anything more deeply moving than helping the disaster victims. In my heart I felt that if I were the one in their situation, I could only hope that someone would take time from their life to help me. After all, it was only a two week assignment, a mere fraction of one year. But I knew it could mean a great deal to someone who has lost everything and felt desperate for one person to care enough about them to help them find their missing loved ones or find a place for them to sleep for the night because their home has been destroyed. Can you imagine how they felt?

I made the decision that has since altered my thinking and changed my life in ways I could have never expected. I volunteered with my local Red Cross shelter to deploy and help the victims of the disaster. I had never before seen anything like the images on television and felt compelled whole heartedly to do something for those affected. My uncle, a New Orleans resident, was safe and was able to get in touch with us from Florida to let us know he was okay after evacuating hours before the storm, in traffic lines that took hours and hours to manage. Two weeks later, I was preparing to go down and help the Red Cross in their relief effort. Most of our local group's training was geared towards emergency relief, mass sheltering, and feeding. The thing that struck me most before I was sent to help out was when another volunteer asked our instructor, "How bad is it down there?" and her answer

was "Imagine bad and then multiply that by 1,000."

Today when anyone asks me about my experience, I have trouble putting into words how it makes me feel inside. When I sit down to write or read through the journal that I kept during the trip, my heart races, my stomach knots, and I get sick thinking of those who were still down there when I left to go home after my assignment was finished. I feel guilty that I had a place to go home to and that they had nothing. It hurt saying goodbye to people with whom I had gone through such a traumatic experience with for days, knowing that I had a way out of the nightmare and they, in most cases, did not.

On my first day as a volunteer, I flew into Jackson, Mississippi, and intently listened to the weather from the pilot's updates. The storms from Hurricane Rita were still in the Gulf and the rain had just started to fall in the local area. I had a piece of paper in my hand with instructions to rent a car from the airport and made a three-hour drive to headquarters in Louisiana. Luckily, there were still cars available and I did not have to sleep in the airport and find a ride in the morning as the voice recording I listened to upon landing had forewarned. I did not find any other volunteers going to my specific location, so I made the drive alone. It was September 22, 2005, and although it was still early in the day, it was pitch dark outside and raining. My arrival at headquarters was after the team giving out assignments had already left to go back to their shelters for the night, so one of the other volunteers sent me to a staff shelter to sleep.

Looking back now, this was the best shelter that I stayed in during my whole trip. The shelter was in a recreation center with about 100 cots in the main room on the basketball court. There were some snacks on the table from a local church and a two-stall bathroom. Outside, there was a bright yellow decontamination tent that we could use to shower. The water to the six-man tent was hooked up from a hose on the side of the facility. I heard it was a chilled shower and would be quite a relief compared to the humidity and heat that is characteristic of a Louisiana summer. The water was still not

safe to drink and there were instructions to keep our eyes, face, and nose out of the water. Brushing my teeth with bottled water became second nature. Throughout the night, volunteers continued to straggle in and it was hard to get any sleep.

At 7 a.m. the shelter managers woke everyone up and corralled us into vans to transport us back to headquarters. Upon leaving, the shelter manager told us we could not leave anything there and would have to take our things to another location since the current shelter's roof probably would not withstand another hurricane. We had to move to a safer shelter. After a lot of paperwork and check-in procedures at headquarters, a group of 13 volunteers, me included, were assigned to a small rural shelter on the western side of the state.

Thirteen people seemed superstitiously odd and I do remember laughing that we were jinxed when we were assigned to a city that no one had heard of before. Our group consisted of retired men, school teachers, independent business owners, photographers, and college students. A more diverse group could not have been randomized. One woman had four kids at home, the youngest only one year old. It was her first time in five years taking a vacation from being a full time mom and she left her kids with their dad. Some were taking time off work, others filling a gap in their traditional lives. Each person was from a different part of the country and had a unique background.

A local man, J.P., who owned a swamp tours business before Hurricane Katrina hit and was now offering his bus and driving service to the Red Cross, was given the assignment to transport us to our location. By mid morning, we had heard snips of news and rumors from the hundreds of people at headquarters that areas south of Route 10 and western parts of the state were being evacuated. We loaded the swamp tours bus regardless of the impending weather conditions and headed to our destination. On the way we stopped at a local Po Boy's restaurant for lunch and thanked the man for staying open for us since it was obvious he was short staffed and wanted to go home. The drive was a few

hours west of New Orleans and the rain and wind picked up though out the duration. The rain and wind were so bad that our driver got lost, and we had to backtrack on a few country roads. Finally, J.P. found our destination and dropped us at the door of our shelter at about 3 p.m. He was very kind and asked if we needed anything further before he left because the weather would not permit him to return. Waving goodbye, we entered what would be our home for the next few days. A local recreation center, the roller-skating rink, had been set up by the city and was housing both Katrina evacuees and taking people in from St. Charles Parish, which was now being evacuated. The landscape around the shelter was very flat farmland with a few large barns and small houses spotting the horizon. I later found out the entire city was one mile by one mile and after that the houses and farms were sparse.

Our welcoming was not the warmest considering we were the first group of people to show up and help the center other than the local community members. The city had been asking for relief help for a couple days since Hurricane Katrina. The city director or mayor, Janet, was quite frustrated and pulled us aside upon our arrival to ask where we had been. Looking around at my peers, I could tell I was not the only one intimidated by her. She was grumpy, disheveled, and very authoritative. After making her point, she let us get started and gave us her phone number in case we needed anything further. She was a very busy woman and we found out later that she was the ex-chief of police and pretty much did everything around the town. She was very well respected and overworked.

The city had managed to buy all the air mattresses that they could from the local Wal-Mart before the storm started and had been checking people and keeping track of their names. The city social workers at the front desk were doing an excellent job considering what they had to work with, and I got the feeling that they were overwhelmed. The only way to show that you were staying at the shelter was by the red ribbon they tied around your wrist when you registered your name. There were so many people staying at the

shelter that when the ribbon ran out, we had to use caution tape as our wrist bands for the shelter residents.

The thirteen of us assigned to the shelter also felt overwhelmed. We had been dropped with our things at a shelter with no existing infrastructure, no provisions, a few flats of water, juice, and some sticky buns. There were about twenty air mattresses, a few foam pads, a satellite phone that did not work, and a continuing influx of new arrivals. There were somewhere between 350 and 400 people in the shelter the first night. Dinner had already been ordered—Dominoes pizza and Kentucky Fried Chicken—but no food after dinner was certain.

We were all very surprised to find that there were no other Red Cross volunteers currently at the shelter. The city ladies continued to sign up people as they came into the shelter. Each new family found a way to carve out their own space and place their blankets or things on the floor in an effort to find some rest. Somehow we would have to feed the 300 plus people, explain to them that there were no beds or cots coming, and tell them we had no provisions for the storm. We had just enough food and water for the first evening's dinner and breakfast the next morning. The city director had been calling the National Guard for two days requesting food and water; however, no supplies had arrived from them either.

Throughout the trip there are a few things that I realized were crucial supplies: duct tape and our Red Cross handouts. However, neither was used in ways you would typically imagine. Amidst the confusion and high tension of an incoming storm, our group of volunteers organized a space for kids to play in a 25 by 15 foot game-room area. A few of us tried to entertain nearly 30 kids, from 2 to 16 years old, to give the adults some time to breathe and take their minds off the storm and their kids for a while. We played Simon Says, Heads-Up Seven-Up, Duck-Duck Goose, and made a hopscotch on the floor with silver duct tape. The duct tape hopscotch and rocks we picked up from outside were all exciting to the kids. We used backs of some of our Red Cross handouts to let the kids color pictures with some

pens that we found in the office of the skating rink.

The most popular was a game called Ring Around the Rosy, which I'm sure the kids could have played for hours and hours if most of the older kids who were helping had not gotten dizzy. It was very rewarding being able to distract the kids when the storm was coming through even though it was only for a couple hours. A few times when the wind was extra strong and something would hit the side of the building the younger kids would grab our hands and look at us to protect them. We hung up their colored pictures, drawn on the back of our Red Cross hand outs, on the wall by the front doors, again using duct tape. Some of the other sheltered residents put duct tape over all of the glass doors and windows so that if they broke they would not shatter pieces into the shelter. This was something they did not teach us in training. When we took the assignment, I don't think anyone in our group expected to be placed in the path of another hurricane improvising for supplies.

The first confrontation that we had came from a woman who had been displaced from the first hurricane. She was so distraught and outraged that we did not have a voucher for her or money to help her out. Her name was Mya, and she had been in the first group of arrivals from Hurricane Katrina three weeks prior. She both threatened us and cried. It was so hard to explain that we had nothing to give her. After she calmed down, Mya put on her jump suit and began yelling and cleaning the shelter. Those that were there for a while expected this behavior because they knew she was bipolar; however, it was quite frightening to the new people. There were so many stories and lives of people living in the shelter that were disrupted by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita; the only thing I had to offer was a hug and the willingness to listen to their experiences. Nothing can describe how scared and helpless we all felt the night Hurricane Rita came through.

I asked one of the women working at the sign-in what a hurricane was like, and she described it as the weather experienced during a tornado only it lasts for a couple of days. This was the first time I began to really get

scared. The only form of communication that we had was radios to the police department and the weather or news on someone's scanner. Luckily, we were positioned within three miles of a rural hospital in case we needed help. Others in our group continued to read their orientation packets and try to phone different Red Cross numbers that we had been given upon arrival. The storm continued to pick up and the wind was very strong.

Around 7 p.m., the buckets of KFC chicken and boxes of Dominoes pizza arrived. Our team of volunteers worked in the 8' x 9' snack stand passing out pizza, chicken, drinks, and utensils to the line of hungry evacuees. Tracy, Carrie, and I were in the kitchen picking out chicken slices and pizza to put on plates for people while the other part of our group stood outside the kitchen window handing out plates, juice, and water. Before we were even halfway through the line, the power went out due to the arrival of Hurricane Rita. Luckily, I had brought a head lamp instead of a regular flashlight. We continued handing out the food with the light from a small lantern and one head lamp. It was difficult to give people what they wanted when you could not see what type of pizza or type of chicken you were handing them. We just stuck our hands in the buckets and felt around for chicken and put it on the plates, trying not to upset anyone and appease requests for drumsticks and breast meat. There was no way to discern pizza toppings and it took nearly an hour for everyone to get through the food line.

The storm was now howling overhead and I'm not sure what material they used to build the roof, but the way that it swayed and buckled during the initial winds made it seem like tin foil. The creaks and groans that we heard made me feel constantly tense and I didn't know if the skating rink would be a safe place.

After dinner, we all continued to pick up the mess in the shelter and clean up the kitchen. We had to break a lock to get into a utility closet, but we found some bleach and a mop and were able to scrub as much of the kitchen as possible. The floors were extremely slippery from all of the chicken grease. Carrie had brought a box of rubber gloves with her and we all used them to clean and keep the area

as sanitary as possible. For the next four days our vests smelled of fried chicken and sweat.

The temperature within the shelter was about 95 degrees, and the humidity and heat were getting worse with the power off. Since there was air conditioning in the shelter initially and now it was shut off, the floors and walls began to sweat. There was not a dry space in the entire shelter. Additionally, we had to close all the doors to keep the downpour of rain out. Tracy and Jane, two of the Red Cross girls, were desperately trying to get hold of someone for support, but as of 3 p.m. the entire headquarters had been shutdown and sent to their respective shelters until the storm passed. It was clear that we would have to wait until after the storm to try again.

At 10p.m., a lone National Guard truck arrived with a huge flat of around 4,000 Meals Ready to Eat (MRE's). I think we all felt a huge relief because the people would now have a meal for the next day. We were worried that after the morning honey buns and juice, there would be nothing left to eat. Not only did the Red Cross volunteers help unload the boxes of MRE's into the shelter, but at this point those in the shelter who were able bodied and still awake came outside to help unload too. We had to work quickly packing the meals into the small registration room of the skating rink, because the rain was so heavy.

I sat down for the first time in about eight hours at around 10:40 p.m. I looked at my watch and began writing in my journal about the events of the day so far. Most of our cell phones had no service and the satellite phone was not working. We had a small gas generator which Bob, one of the volunteers, hooked up to the infants with oxygen and those with sleeping masks. Every time the gas ran out or the generator stopped, we had to jump and struggle to restart it as quickly as possible. I kept wishing that someone with experience would come and help us and be our savior; yet we were the ones who were supposed to be supporting everyone at the shelter. Someone in the shelter was using the kitchen and had closed the doors. When the thirteen of us were not watching the kitchen, people would sneak in and take things. I felt like we had no control.

Later that evening when we needed to get someone's insulin out of the refrigerator in the kitchen, I found the door was locked. No one had keys to the entire facility. We tried crawling through the window, but it was too small. Finally, I asked Mya if she knew how to open the door. She had been around longer than anyone and I thought she in some way would be able to help. To my surprise, she grabbed my shoulders and pushed me in front of the door to block her from the view of the rest of the shelter. She pulled out a knife and another pocket device and picked the lock for me. Then she stood up and said in a very stern tone, "Don't you tell no one!" I thanked her for her help. Throughout the week Mya was a huge help to the volunteers. She was very clean and would get mad if people did not pick up their trash, and she yelled at other residents to clean. It made our job much easier. Our first day went well considering all we showed up with was our backpacks and nothing else. Sometimes I did not always feel safe considering we were in a big room with 350 strangers and no security. I was warned that the New Orleans crowd could be a little rough. All of the other shelters had a security guard. I knew that there were many residents like Mya who had knives on them, but we had no authority to take them from them.

Around 11:30 p.m., the radio began to report many tornado warnings just south of us and they were headed in our direction. The storm was going to hit our area in about two hours and probably last until the next evening. I had not seen a weather report, but from the description on the radio, our shelter went through the eye of the storm. Later looking at weather maps, I felt infuriated that the Red Cross had sent us to the shelter just hours before the storm hit and put me in such danger. There were four of us who volunteered to stay up the first night in case we were needed. Bob, Carry, Tracy, and I all had our journals and enjoyed the time off our feet while we sat at the front desk and watched the storm. We listened to radio broadcasts about the tornadoes that surrounded our area, heard the wind shake the entire building, and watched the rain blow sideways. It kept me mesmerized for hours.

The shelter we were in did not have any showers. There were four stalls in the men's restroom, four in the women's, and a few sinks that were viewable to the public. So in an effort to freshen up, I changed my T-shirt and undergarments in the bathroom stall, brushed my teeth with a bottle of water, and used my deodorant. My cargo pants and red vest still reeked of pizza and chicken. I had time to look around at the other volunteers who were sleeping on the floor of the office, on desk tops, under tables, and by the rollers-kates in the deejay booth and front office. Somehow, we managed to find enough floor and counter space to rest. One older guy was sleeping in a chair he propped against the wall. Since it was so packed, the four of us who were awake had arranged with the people on the next shift where we would sleep. We had to share floor and counter space and sleep in shifts. Two of the girls even shared a sleeping bag because each of us had been told by our Red Cross shelters to bring different things in order to prepare for the experience.

I walked around and noticed there were people in their 80's and 90's sitting at the food booths and sleeping on the tables. Most were awake all night. Others lay on the floor in random areas. There was no organization for this crowd, just small nests for each family. We placed one lantern in the center of the skating rink and used long power cords attached to the generator at the front door to put one florescent light in each bathroom. It was nearly impossible to get to the bathroom without stepping on someone on the way.

At 12:40 a.m., some of the ceiling panels in the center of the room started to fall down. The wind was so strong that we could see the side of the building buckling, which only made more ceiling panels fall. Bob quietly woke up the family sleeping below the falling area and asked them to move closer to the center of the shelter while Tracy, Carry, and I put caution tape around the area and buckets under the dripping water. We also had to call 911 via the police radio during the middle of the night because we couldn't keep the generator running and requested that they take the oxygen-dependent people to the hospital to care for them. When 7 a.m. arrived, we woke

up the rest of the group; it felt like I had been awake for days.

That morning the other half of the shelter staff helped serve honey buns from the crates we had found in the office the day before. The morning winds were still howling and the sun barely came out. We were all awake again by 9 a.m. Bob slept for only two hours. Everyone in the shelter was relatively quiet, and most decided to sleep the stormy day away. More of the ceiling panels fell down, but the fire department said that the shelter was okay and things were still structurally sound. It was very unnerving to see the whole ceiling and even cement walls bowing or breathing in and out with the wind.

The rain had been falling so hard that it was now coming under the back doors in the rink where most of the people were sleeping. It was flooding under the doors and soaking everyone. Bob and two stronger guys had to open the doors one by one, shove folded cardboard boxes underneath them, then close them again on top of the boxes in order to keep most of the water from coming into the shelter. It took all their strength to close the storm doors and jam cardboard under them, all while resisting the awful winds. At least it slowed the rush of water to a small trickle. Everyone was awake again as we mopped up the water on the floor with the buckets and supplies from the skating rink closets.

It was decided that we should clean up the shelter the best we could that morning since things had gotten so unsanitary and sweaty throughout the night. The bathrooms smelled absolutely appalling and had stopped up because there was hardly any water pressure. We put on rubber gloves again and picked up bloody tissues and sanitary napkins off the floors, flushed, plunged, and wiped poop off the floors. We even bleached all of the bathroom stalls as best as we could in the dark and with flashlights. It makes me sick thinking of the rotten smell that we encountered. We checked and cleaned them every two hours but could not keep up with the mess. Soon, the smell was not just from the bathrooms, but from every one of the 400 people, including myself, who had been sweating in the 95 plus degree heat and humidity of being closed up

all night, and we had no way to freshen up or take a shower. We were all sleeping on muddy wet floors with whatever materials we had brought with us as a pillow or blanket.

After calling Red Cross headquarters all day, someone finally managed to get a recording that said they would be closed until 2 p.m. because of the storm. So, we decided to start serving lunch at around 11:30 a.m. Again, it was craziness because there were only two of us who knew how to properly prepare the MRE meals. The two of us showed the rest of our volunteer group how to open and cook the food; then we set up as many tables and chairs as we could in the game room to serve people. One of the guys had to yell as loud as he could to make an announcement to the shelter that we were going to feed the kids, the elderly, and the sick first. He also sought out help with preparation from others in the shelter who knew how to open the MRE meals.

There were groups of 20 people that rotated in and out of the game room with the little light we had, and we showed them how to heat the food and cook it appropriately. We ended up opening and starting the heating pads for nearly 300 people with maybe three pairs of scissors and a few pocket knives that people had. At the time, we just ignored how many personal knives people used for their meals because we did not have the tools to open the packages either. The heating chemicals in the packets get very hot and in an effort to help everyone we ripped all of them open and did it the first time, sacrificing our own fingers. MRE's require opening four or five different tough plastic packages in order to eat everything in the bag. Most of us had blisters and heat spots on our hands after three hours of helping everyone with their food. We even made sure to take away the matches included in the MREs from all the little kids. What a mess that would have been!

The afternoon was crazy; we had to call the hospital twice for a woman who was pregnant and in distress. Another man was upset and crying; he could not remember his name or where he was. Only two people in our volunteer group had CPR certifications, and there were no nurses or doctors in the

shelter. I was one of the volunteers with some medical training from my life guarding courses back home. We tried to prevent emergencies, but what can you do when people have lost or run out of their medications?

A few minutes later, people started fighting over the air mattresses and foam pads on the floor. Some families were very angry when we asked them to share with the elderly people who had been sitting at the table all night and just wanted to lie down or take a nap. The fighting was so bad that we ended up gathering as many mattresses as we could into one section and taping it off for the older, more frail people in the crowd so we could keep an eye on them. Most of the foam pads were unusable because they had soaked up sweat, muddy water, and in some cases urine from little kids. Some nurses from the local hospital stopped by in an ambulance to check on the people quickly and then had to go back to the hospital. It had been almost three days since I had fully changed my clothes and showered. Later that evening, we again passed out MREs to everyone in the shelter, but we did not have any daylight this time. We had one lantern in the center of the shelter and offered help to anyone who could not figure out how to cook them. Most adults were able to help their kids but we still went around and helped the older people who were too frail to manage on their own. I found a chair to put my feet up and journal later that evening about the day's events. So much had happened that I could not even remember it all in the morning.

My feet hurt and I felt as if I had walked twenty miles. It was still raining very hard outside. The rain would let up for a few minutes; then it would rain sideways and heavy for another hour. It was hard to believe that it had been only 30 hours since I got to the shelter. When we looked out the doors we saw that the wind had pushed a minivan a few feet in the mud, and we could see lawn furniture fly across the windows at top speed. Tornadoes had been spotted in the area and most of the afternoon was very frightening. At 4:30 p.m., Jane got through to headquarters only to find out that no one had received our messages, and that no provisions were being sent. A few of the roads that we had taken to get to the

shelter were reportedly washed away or were still under water. All the information we received was from second hand sources, which made the rumor mill worse within the shelter. Some people from Lake Charles informed us that they could not return to their homes for a couple days. We were sent information that another shelter in the area also did not have food and was sending its people to our shelter for food. There were two crates of honey buns, spoiled milk, a few crates of water, and many MRE's left.

I felt so mentally exhausted and missed my family so much after just the first few days. I'm sure they were very worried about me and I could not even make an outgoing phone call to let them know that I was all right. It was late in the evening when we finally decided to eat as a group. It was the first chance we had to sit together and learn where everyone had come from and about their families back home. A police officer showed up to help us watch the crowd for the second night. The whole shelter had about ten flashlights total, and we shared them with the residents when anyone had to use the restroom or walk about the skating rink. One elderly man in a wheelchair had to have his catheter changed by his son every few hours, so we gave his family a flashlight to use. I have no idea how they managed to maneuver through the bodies laying all over the floor. I felt bad that we were so crowded and could not provide a better environment for those in the shelter.

After we finished our late night dinner, we all did our own activities, each picking an area to clean or pick up. Some of the other people in the shelter helped us clean the bathrooms this time and thanked us for being there for them. The soap had run out of the dispensers and some of the Red Cross volunteers put out bottles of alcohol-based hand sanitizer for people to use. Someone took it a few minutes later. The same thing happened to the additional toilet paper rolls we had placed on the backs of the toilets. At times things were frustrating, but it felt so good to be there when I was needed, regardless of the circumstances.

When the rain stopped that night, we hooked up a huge floor fan to the generator to cool off everyone at the back door. The hot

and muggy weather had returned and it was cooler outside than in the shelter that night. Most of us slept in chairs by the doors instead of on the floors. We could tell that a few people were suffering from dehydration and one man even passed out, so we had to keep giving out whatever water we had left to people as they were resting and sleeping. Some families had complained that there were people undressed lying in the room. Tracy and Bob asked them to put their clothes back on, and one man was very angry because he was so hot and just wanted to cool off.

That night, a group of fifteen people crowded around a man who had passed out on his walk to the bathroom. They held hands in a circle, prayed to Jesus, sang, and asked Him to help the man and give him strength to make it through the night. Carrie and I thought he was having a heart attack and called 911. We asked him if he had any family or anyone with him, trying to keep him conscious. It was so upsetting to hear he had lost his daughter when they evacuated. He returned from the hospital that morning feeling better after cooling down and getting some water. He told us that he was extremely dehydrated. In just two days everyone in the shelter had become a family and had bonded together from the experience. We were no longer seen as Red Cross volunteers, but as part of the group. Everyone started helping us work and there were families rotating to clean the bathrooms.

In the middle of the night we discovered that because the doors were all open we had a ton of little green frogs that came into the shelter and were on the walls and ceilings. They were very loud and obnoxious, but most of the time you could sleep through the noise because of the huge floor fan. One even hopped across my journal while I was writing. The fire ants also started getting worse after the rain stopped. We had to run when we went out to the dumpsters, because if we walked slowly they would bite our legs. The ants also came into the shelter and many people could not sleep because they were getting bitten. It was horrible to see little kids scratching themselves and crying. My own ankles were itchy from being bitten. Most of us slept on the counter tops that night, but Chris decided

to sleep on the floor. She woke up and started yelling because there were fire ants all over her blanket! To keep things in perspective, we joked—at least the alligators did not want to stay at the shelter—and most of the residents laughed with us. At orientation they warned us of alligators, snakes, and spiders, but not frogs and fire ants.

We discovered a home remedy for fire ants while going through the shelter. One woman pulled out a tube of “Butt Cream.” This was a multipurpose cream that was originally designed for diaper rash. The woman said that her son-in-law was actually responsible for the product, and explained that it stopped itching and that it could be used on acne. She was glad to be helpful, so we gave her some rubber gloves and sent all of our fire ant victims to her for application of the cream. I had the sticky white paste on my ankles for one evening, and I have to admit, it really did work!

Because of the heat and the fact that the generator kept failing to keep the fans running, the third night was just as unbearable as the previous two. More people were exhausted and dehydrated; we sent three people to the emergency room in the middle of the night. The floors and the smell were increasingly gross. We had to stop a couple of families from bathing in the toilets that night and asked them to please use the sink and only wash what they needed to.

We still had no power, no ice, little water, and no relief had come yet. From the battery radio we learned that the lucky few who lived locally could return to their houses the next day, but many from Houston and St. Charles would have to stay longer. The next day’s meals were going to be MRE’s again, at 9 a.m. and at 4 p.m. A lady with congestive heart failure was sent home from the hospital because her levels had returned to normal, but we knew she could not stay at the shelter for the night because it was too hot for her. So we had to make arrangements with a local nursing care center to take her in for the night. At this point, cooperation from anyone outside the shelter was like pulling teeth.

The whole ordeal surrounding this situation only enlightened me further about our health

care system and problems that exist as far as overcrowding and times of crisis. Returning this woman to sleep at a hot shelter was essentially going to send her over the edge again. We did not want her to die. Others without medication were experiencing anxiety attacks and nightmares from bipolar disorders they informed us about earlier. It would have been nice to have had some medical assistants to handle these situations. I kept wondering why no one from the Red Cross had contacted us or even worried that we were alive, considering our shelter went through the eye of the storm.

I slept a few hours that night. Everyone woke up early to see if they could return to their homes because the sun was now shining. To our surprise, the National Guard showed up at 10 a.m. with three trucks of cots and an SUV to check on the facility’s power supply. Everyone at the shelter helped unload the MRE’s, water, blankets, and cots, and even helped assemble them outside on the front lawn.

We asked everyone to bring their things outside to dry out so we could mop the floors in the shelter. This was a gross and smelly process since most of the mattresses were wet with muddy water and urine. They could not be cleaned off because of the felt covering on the plastic, so we had to stack them in the back rooms so that no one would touch them. While cleaning, we found that some people had managed to sneak in their animals. There was dog poop in some areas and squished frogs in nearly every corner of the skating rink. The bathrooms were once again the most disgusting.

Outside everyone was given MRE’s and waters. We asked the hospital to give us as many bottles of bleach as they could spare, and we cleaned every surface we could in the time the sun was out. After sleeping on tables, chairs, and counter tops for a few nights, everyone could not wait to nap on their cots with blankets. We had three hundred cots set up and arranged in rows across the skating rink. It seemed that everyone was excited to have a place to sleep. The kids even started to play and did not seem as frightened by the shelter experience. I can’t imagine what

thoughts ran through their minds or how their lives will be forever affected by the hurricanes.

We still needed to get more bleach to finish cleaning the bathrooms. Tracy and I volunteered to hitch a ride with a local woman passing by the shelter. She had all of her most important belongings in the car. Her name was Beth, and she shared that she had been up all night driving in the storm. She was able to give us a ride to the fire station and hospital to find more bleach. Beth ran a funeral home and had been traveling around through the storm to families homes when they called her. She looked exhausted, and told us that she had just come from a home where the father of the family had given his older mother CPR for forty-five minutes during the storm because they could not get the phone to work to call 911; eventually their mother passed away because he was too exhausted to continue. She was so kind to us, and was on her way to help out yet another family. The people in Louisiana who helped us were angels. I don't know if I will ever see any of them again, but I can tell you the color of their hair and the way they smiled. Those individuals, ignored exhaustion and their own needs to help others who needed them. They are my heroes and have made a huge impact on the way that I live my life.

Later that afternoon, we ventured out again and caught a ride with a family who was driving in a van to the little market in town. The driver had heard that the store was selling supplies for cash only and would stay open while it was still daylight. The entire city still had no power and, as far as we knew, neither did the state of Louisiana. We bought as much toilet paper, paper towels, and bleach as we could carry. The family was nice enough to drive us back to the shelter. I feel like the mayhem and tension that was present during the storm was because everyone was scared and exhausted. There was a complete difference in human nature at the shelter when we returned. Everyone was cleaning and helping each other out. The sun was shining.

After all the grunt work was finished, we had a shelter or community meeting for all those that planned on staying. The Red Cross volunteers introduced themselves and we gave

them some details about our lives. Everyone established some basic living rules since the new rumor was that most of the residents of St. Charles would be staying between one to four weeks at the shelter. It was a productive afternoon and I could tell it was the first time people could really sleep since the storm. All afternoon the skating rink was very quiet; the fans were working well from the generator, and people had a clean place to lay their heads.

The local restaurant had opened in town and ran its power on a generator just to make food for the shelter residents. We had jambalaya, fried alligator, and other delicious southern Louisiana food. I finally reached one of the friends I had made from my local shelter. He was working at the logistics area at headquarters and was very surprised to hear from me. After I told him what we had been through and that we desperately needed showers, he said he would do what he could to help out. Apparently, when we were sent to the shelter on the evening of the storm, someone at headquarters had forgotten to update the shelter list. The small town we were in, as well as our shelter, was not even listed. They did not know we existed until we repeatedly called to ask for help—and they were the ones who sent us there! We had been dropped off and forgotten about.

Later that evening, the Red Cross vans showed up with water and clean up kits that had bleach. We no longer needed bleach, of course, because we had managed on our own. More families started showing up from other areas to eat and get water from our shelter. Janet, the mayor, had been very busy during the storm helping the police department and calling for help from the National Guard. And to our surprise, the National Guard showed up with a huge generator to hook up to the building at around 11:30 p.m. that evening. After hooking up all the high-voltage adapters and checking the breakers, they said that we could run the power at 50 percent. By 3:30 a.m. we were able to turn on most of the lights and the air conditioning started to work at about half strength as well!

My friend from headquarters sent out some firefighters to inspect the shelter while they were making rounds to other shelters in

the area. They commented that we were a ticking time bomb. If anyone got sick it would spread rampantly in the humidity and we were still not up to par despite all our hard work. The two men said they would do everything they could to get us a shower as quickly as they could. They were able to get a waiver signed for a decontamination gang shower to deliver to the shelter by Tuesday evening, and showed us how to put it up and get it to work. They warned us that we needed to unclog hair and other things from the pump motors so they would not burn up. Apparently the small "O" rings inside the shower cost thousands of dollars each, and we had to make sure not to lose them in the bottom muck or water. I could be wrong, but the rumor was that each gang shower cost nearly fifty thousand dollars.

The shelter residents were able to shower for the first time in four days with whatever soap we could scrounge up from the deliveries that had come in that day. We hooked the shower up to the hose on the side of the building and guarded and regulated how many people were allowed in at a time. Unfortunately during the night, someone sliced holes in the hose and we could not use it the next day. Bob and Tracy had to borrow a hose from someone in the community so that more people could shower. Not only was the shower tent vandalized that night, but we also had an incident in the shelter. A middle aged man had managed to get drunk off something and disrobed in the center of the skating rink in the middle of the night. He peed on the floor, then passed out on top of a person on a cot. The police officer had to remove him from the shelter. I felt horrible for the humiliation that his family experienced. The shelters were supposed to be a safe haven for them and we could not control the security with just one police officer at the entrance. I did not feel safe, and I'm sure the others felt the same.

The next day things were finally starting to arrive for the shelter. There were fresh towels and shower kits as well as sanitary supplies. Two nurses even arrived from the Red Cross to work at our shelter, and they had a van. They were surprised to see that, again, there were no nurses already there and that we had managed through the storm the

way we did. During the next two days, every single member of our team had a breakdown and needed to vent. I think most of the crying was from minor events that just set them off after being overworked and not getting enough sleep. The long hours had emotionally pulled us in many directions both by helping people, cleaning, and listening to their stories. It was hard helping disparate families try to contact other loved ones and register names on missing person's lists. Mya told us that she was up to her neck in water while trapped in her home in New Orleans, only to be placed on an overpass by boat, and then helicoptered to the west side of the state. Many of those rescued had no way to get back home, and didn't even know if their homes still existed.

By Wednesday and Thursday, things began to shift into an administrative nightmare; we were given paperwork from many different rescue groups, and had many angry people showing up for both supplies and money which we did not have. A shelter manager was sent to our shelter by the Red Cross to take over management of the shelter. It was both a relief for the group and such a change that it was hard to handle. We were all on edge and needed a break. A mental health professional was sent to our shelter and talked with most of the 13 original staff that worked through Hurricane Rita. He advised us all to be reassigned and go back to headquarters because we were so worn down. A new staff slowly replaced us over the next couple of days.

On Wednesday and Thursday afternoon we managed to talk to the parents and the local school district about enrolling students into classes and getting them uniforms within the week. We spent an entire day helping the residents fill out the paperwork and when Red Cross came to pick it up, they would not accept it because something was wrong with the type of forms we had used. Our entire day had been a waste. We were not trained on what forms to fill out or the proper way to fill them out. As the deliveries were made, we just took the paperwork without instruction and tried to figure it out. Janet, the city mayor, even offered a bus to the school when it opened again for children to shower before classes and change

if they needed. This shelter was meant to be a temporary area to house people, but it unfortunately was unprepared and not designed to house people long term.

Wednesday afternoon, Janet drove me to the administrative building for the schools in another town to get new student packets and information for each child. We enrolled at least twelve students, although some parents did not want to yet because they were sure they would be allowed to return to their homes soon. School resumed and by Friday, the kids in the shelter were allowed to shower early with their families and go to school with some new kids. Most of them had a good time their first day of school and returned to the shelter in good spirits. There were a couple of younger children that were crying and upset and had to be sent home to their parents because it was too much for them to handle.

We made a banner on a sheet saying "thank you" to the city and the kids decorated it. That evening, the mayor arranged a bus to pick up shelter residents to go to the local high school football game. A few of the Red Cross workers went as chaperones so that single parents could run errands and have some time to themselves. We bought the kids popcorn and candy and hung up the sign that they made by the concession stands. It was a big boost for those kids and adults that attended. We were reconnecting with the community after the storm. The mosquitoes were horrible on Thursday and Friday because of how wet the ground was. Most of us had brought some kind of repellent, and we shared with everyone in the shelter. There were swarms of mosquitoes on the bus that took us to the game; we had to duck our heads behind the seats and cover our faces on the ride. Even with the windows open, it was horrible.

Sunday morning a large group of new arrivals came, and we were told that we would be sent back to headquarters for a new assignment. We worked there until we had to return home. The hardest part about leaving the shelter was saying goodbye to the friends I had made. The group of us had seen the best and the worst come out in the emotionally stressful and scary evenings we had been through together. We had fought, cried, and

relaxed over dinner together. The displaced residents had become a family to us and I was sad to go without knowing how the kids would adjust to school or if the families would find their houses in one piece. I will never know if the man who had passed out found his daughter. I wonder if the family of four girls was able to find a home and some clothes to wear to school. After registering names on lists for the shelter and seeing families show up and pick up loved ones, I felt heartbroken. Janet and the neighbors encourage us to visit if ever we were driving through the area and needed a place to stay. Community customs and holiday events for Mardi Gras were discussed, and even the town officials themselves were sad to see us go.

I felt guilty for abandoning them, as if I was betraying them for not staying until everything was all resolved. My heart aches thinking about driving away from the shelter and flying home. I had a home to return to, and they would be living there for a long time to come. The questions I still had and what I went through with them have forever changed the way that I look at things and people. The hurricanes brought out the best and the worst in some individuals. How could we have been forgotten as a Red Cross shelter? Most of us were mad and emotionally worn out at the end of our trip. Bob decided to stay down in Louisiana for another month and became a very important contributor at headquarters. He told me he wanted to help out the smaller shelters that needed provisions so that no one would be forgotten the way we had been. Before we left, we found some brown rope necklaces in an Avon donation box. There were exactly 13; each of us wore them home when we left the shelter. It was a way to connect us to each other forever so that we could remember the experience.

I have learned how to connect with people I have never met, who may be completely different than me in a way that I could not describe. Resolving fights within our own team by remembering that we were there to help and that most of our own needs had to be ignored was one of the most rewarding lessons I have ever had. The small things that I used to think were important, or the little arguments

that people used to make about laundry seemed so minuscule in comparison to what is now an everyday struggle for those who have had to leave their homes. I feel very fortunate for everything that I have and I want to do something to make a difference in others' lives. This experience has opened my eyes to our human culture, politics, and infrastructure. It has changed the way that I will work and what I plan to do in my life. Sometimes what I saw on television was not completely truthful, especially when the news reported that all emergency rescue volunteers had evacuated Louisiana for the second storm. There were many shelters not evacuated. It was much worse than any pictures in the media. I visited the worst areas before I left. We were lucky—others were not. I am so thankful to everyone I met and everyone who is currently helping the relief effort. Small reminders of that experience often make me cry, and I get worked up when I hear people giving speeches about the destruction. I had to stop watching

television for a while after I went to help out in Louisiana. The people who are still suffering and need our assistance should come first. The relief effort is still there. Although nothing will ever be the same to those displaced, I would do anything to help them return to normal life again.

It has been a while now, and I am still processing the things I experienced. It was a shock to my life and put many things into perspective for me. I am more patient. Trivial things do not bother me as much. I have gone outside my comfort zone, and I cannot decide if I am more in touch with reality or slightly displaced from the experience. It has changed my life.

Marie Webber, is an M.H.S.A. student studying Health Management and Policy at the School of Public Health, University of Michigan. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: marieweb@umich.edu.



Supplies at last! The author next to a National Guard truck.

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.