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## The Silver Lining of Disaster

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

September

2005

Given the distressing and ever-worsening situation following Hurricane Katrina, it just didn't seem right to have a Hot Topic right now about fun. Yes, we actually need fun now more than ever but, with so much misery to alleviate, our priorities rightfully are on helping survivors. So, we'll re-post the [Volunteers Just Want to Have Fun](#) essay for October (if you want to read it now, just click the link).

In one week's time, the world has tilted on its axis in ways we never imagined. Hurricane Katrina is the worst natural disaster in the history of our country, affecting a geographic area the size of Great Britain and causing the largest migration of citizens since the Great Depression. The Iraq/Afghanistan military front drags on with mounting casualties, we have two vacancies on the Supreme Court within an extremely polarized political climate, and now we discover that the fragmented emergency response units of governments at all levels are woefully inadequate to respond to a major crisis that was somewhat predictable.

I have often said that volunteers are the silver lining in the cloud of disaster, and that truth is certainly evident everywhere in the United States right now. Despite all the mismanagement and confusion in the Gulf Coast rescue and relief effort, the consistently bright spots of news reporting are what people are doing to help one another. And, in the long term, volunteer work in response to this crisis may bring our country together in ways we can't imagine.

On the individual level, paid first responders have been doing incredible, indescribable service way beyond their normal job no one can pay for the kind of dedication, non-stop efforts, and personal risk offered by those who have been rescuing thousands of people stranded by the flood and destruction. It may not be accurate to refer to this as volunteering, but it sure is both voluntary and heroic.

Ordinary people who dropped everything to help volunteers by any definition are doing an amazing range of work both in direct relief at the site of the disaster and in cities across the nation. The most obvious, and some less visible, tasks volunteers are tackling right now include:

- Team members under the direction of the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and the other formal relief organizations to receive evacuees; distribute emergency food, water, bedding, and clothing; offer caring/friendly support; etc.
- Private citizens who didn't wait for the government or national nonprofits and instead used their own money and supplies to help whomever they could locate in affected areas. On a larger scale, there are countless examples of private groups reaching out to counterparts in Louisiana and Mississippi, such as volunteer fire companies in the north locating a fire company flooded out and sending truckloads of goods specifically to their colleagues in need.
- People in all 50 states who are opening their homes to evacuees, whether with a spare bedroom, a clear garage, or even a living room sofa. This numbers in the thousands. MoveOn.org started the Web site [www.hurricanehousing.org](http://www.hurricanehousing.org) one week ago to facilitate the matching of available beds to people in need and already have 150,000 beds offered. This particular form of service is remarkable for the leap of faith required to open one's home to a stranger for an unknown amount of time (and without reimbursement).
- Animal lovers who are searching for lost and abandoned pets in the rubble, setting up shelters and adoption programs for these small victims, too. This includes attempting to reunite pets with owners scattered far and wide.
- Evacuees are currently being shuttled to large shelters in other states, most notably the Houston Astrodome. There are literally thousands of volunteers doing everything from welcoming newcomers and distributing personal items, cooking and serving meals, running youth programs, providing medical and counseling care, and more. Volunteers with the Houston-based nonprofit, Technology for All, which uses technology as a tool to empower and create opportunities for under-resourced communities immediately set up an Internet center in the Astrodome to allow shelter residents to contact loved ones online and other necessary tasks. Just read the blog from a volunteer at <http://texasctcs.blogspot.com/> for insight into this effort.
- Similarly, dozens of cities large and small are preparing to take in groups of displaced citizens. As just one example, here in Philadelphia two school buildings slated for closure are being refurbished for several hundred temporary residents the city is authorizing and funding much of this, but it's volunteers who are doing the bulk of the work.

The Bush Administration has always been interested in mobilizing the faith community in what it calls an army of compassion. While this concern with religion has its opponents, the Katrina crisis is indisputably the perfect opportunity for churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues to express their humanitarian beliefs. And indications are that they are rising to the challenge in a big way. Inter-denominational cooperation is mobilizing, again, thousands of volunteers to assist with relief work and perhaps more importantly to commit to longer-term assistance to help evacuees who wish to resettle in the new community find jobs and permanent housing.

This is all an immediate response to a clear and present need. But the work will literally go on for years. It's a Herculean effort that's not for the faint-hearted. Yet it's exactly what is best about a democratic society: the ability and the will of its citizens to work together for the common good.

We've often forgotten this in the midst of dispute and turmoil, but times like these remind us that we have more in common than not. We'll need some distance from today to see and evaluate the ultimate results of this tragic situation, but let's be mindful of the good that might come out of all this.

- *Maybe* there will be new interest in eliminating poverty, since the hurricane blew the lid off the seamy underside of American prosperity to reveal just how many people live on the edge every day.
- *Maybe* those evacuees who have been the invisible poor will ultimately find a better life since, all of a sudden, they are receiving personal attention from people who want to help.
- *Maybe* school systems suddenly faced with unanticipated jump in student numbers will find citizens newly willing to tutor and give other support to all students.
- *Maybe* people who were comfortable in their closed communities will discover, through volunteer relief work, that all people share common needs and emotions, whether of different races, educational levels, employment histories, or other ultimately superficial differences.

We can hope.

Our deepest concern and good wishes go to all who are involved in this remarkable national effort. Volunteers got there first, are there now, and will be there through the coming months and years. Count on it.

*If you would like to share a volunteering story related to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, or explain something volunteers are doing to help that is out of the ordinary, please submit a response.*

**Addendum** (posted 10 September 2005)

### **A Powerful Idea**

Karen Key, the Director of Volunteer Alliances for AARP, voiced a creative and powerful idea during a conversation with me and colleagues from Youth Service America, the Points of Light Foundation, and the National Human Service Assembly. We had been talking about the barriers both young and old people face in offering their services as volunteers, as well as the importance of doing so.

We all agreed that two critical benefits individuals derive from volunteering are an increase (sometimes the start of) *self-confidence* and a feeling of *affirmation*. (Thanks to Bob Goodwin of the Points of Light Foundation for suggesting this view of volunteering.) Both are necessary for every human being, but often the young and the old have few ways to feel worthwhile or to achieve recognition. Service to others demonstrates – to volunteers themselves – that they can be *givers* of help as well as recipients, and that they have skills and talents to contribute that others value.

That led to a discussion of Hurricane Katrina and all those evacuees sitting in crowded shelters waiting to restart their lives. Karen mused, “wouldn’t it be incredible if the evacuees were given the chance to go out and do volunteer work to help others? Think of how that would turn the tables for them and return some self-esteem.” Wow! What a great idea.

It's so easy to look at the thousands of evacuees as simply people in need. And, of course, they are in great need and truly in crisis. But once their immediate requirements for care and sustenance are met, they are sitting around doing nothing. Worse, as the days go by, they are continuing to receive charity from others in a one-way flow.

I'm sure that many shelter residents are finding ways to make themselves useful to others on a one-to-one basis (child and senior respite care, Internet research for those who don't know how to do it, organizing play for children, etc.). But if the organizations coordinating the relief activities would stop for a moment and really *see* these people as more than "in need," some remarkable developments could occur. First, why not ask willing and able shelter residents to help in the relief effort itself? For one thing, I'll bet there are some great cooks who would love to participate in cooking the mass meals. Let your imagination go and many other types of tangible activities will occur to you – each one providing genuine service, keeping the evacuees busy in ways that affirm they still have much to give. To do this well, it would be necessary to inventory the talents and experience of shelter residents, much like compiling a "skills bank" to tap.

Now take this idea one step further. If you are managing a volunteer center or individual agency program that is in close proximity to a shelter, do some recruitment there. This is neither a prison nor a hospital; the residents are allowed to come and go as they wish. So figure out a way with shelter organizers to post a notice or make an announcement and publicize various volunteer position openings, both one-time chances to serve and ongoing assignments (many of these people will not be returning home for a long time). Naturally each person can freely choose whether or not to participate, but many will welcome this as an opportunity to say thank you to the community that so willingly rescued them. In so doing, they will feel *useful* – a great first step on the road to recovery.

Related Topics: [Disaster Response](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

***Submitted on 24 September 2005 anonymously***

A long, long time ago - there was an idealistic dream called "Hands Across America."

The local Phoenix office found that a group of folks from the local homeless shelter were some of their best volunteers -- they handled some of the counting and assembling of "Mile kits" and even served as reliable members of the phone bank, answering questions and linking willing people with available "miles."

People with lots of spare time that answered the call to help.

I agree with this topic, who better to understand the need to help than those who are closest to the problem?

***Submitted on 19 September 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport, NJ USA***

We see the immediate and long range benefit of recipient involvement year after year at Project Linus NJ. Children who have received handmade blankets during a traumatic time in their lives; reciprocating by creating handmade blankets for their peers. We have been invited to conduct

blanket making workshops in inner cities to engage youth volunteers in a give-back program. We wholeheartedly agree that when a person feels of use they re-emerge from personal tragedy with a tangible sense of self reliance and shared insight.

**9 September 2005 by Susan Ellis**

We've just created a new category in our online library about [Disaster Response](#).

**Submitted on 9 September 2005 by Mary-Jeanine, Florida Quilt Network, Publisher, Orlando, FL USA**

Quilting is more than just a hobby! Thousands of quilters from around the country are mobilizing to hold workshops to make quilts and blankets of all sizes for victims to use now and to treasure in the future. Major quilting organizations like Quilts, Inc., Project Linus and AQS, are collecting quilts to disperse as needed.

**Submitted on 8 September 2005 by Susan Pronk, Saint Marys Hospital/Mayo Clinic, Volunteer Coordinator, Rochester, MN USA**

Volunteers know the meaning of giving from the heart and our hearts have certainly been touched by the tragedy of Katrina. Many of our volunteers at Saint Marys Hospital/Mayo Clinic have asked what they can do to help and have been waiting for news as to when and where to make material as well as monetary donations and physical volunteering either in the Gulf Coast or here with the evacuees to be stationed in Minnesota. The response from the Mayo Clinic professionals ranging from physicians to housekeeping personnel wanting to volunteer has been overwhelming as I'm sure it has at many other health care facilities across our nation. College students are already planning to use their Winter and Spring vacations to go to the Gulf Coast to volunteer. I agree with Susan Ellis that "volunteers are the silver lining in the cloud of disaster".

**Submitted on 8 September in response to our monthly e-mail update:**

Greetings from New Zealand.....

Even this far from your country we feel the tragedy that has befallen so many. I just hope that in among all the political fallout that seems inevitable, no one forgets the volunteers who we see on our TV screens night after night, doing things they probably never imagined they would be called on to do. So if there is an opportunity through your organisation, can you let them know their efforts seem superhuman, especially when viewed from many thousands of kilometres.

Cheers, Don Rhodes

**Submitted on 8 September 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, New Jersey USA**

Community Voice Mail is working with Cisco Systems as we speak to offer free telephone system/phone numbers for hurricane victims to utilize in their search and connection to family, long range resources and job relocations to come. This is a viable communication tool offered free of charge to homeless families and working poor with new applications being discovered! For more information contact [www.cvm.org](http://www.cvm.org)

***Submitted on 8 September 2005 by anonymous***

My husband is a Deputy for our local Sherrif's department. The department decided to send "a few, hopefully 20" people down to help relieve the New Orleans Police. When they asked who would be willing to take a couple of weeks of their own vacation time to go, the response was overwhelming... over 150 men and women (of the 400 employees) volunteered to go. I think it's outstanding that so many are willing to donate themselves and their time to this cause.

***Submitted on 8 September 2005 by Lesli Hill, American Red Cross, DSHR Volunteer, Warsaw MO USA***

I am a Natioanl Disaster Volunteer for the Red Cross and have worked many disasters--including ground zero in NYC. I am also a professional fundraising officer for a college and understand the immeasurable value of volunteers. My Red Cross experiences however, have taught me the most valuable lesson on volunteering--that lesson is that the best volunteers are willing to lay aside their agendas and their feelings of self-importance to respond to a need that is not at a convenient time for them. We all have time to give on OUR schedule--when we can neatly pencil it in to our to do list. The mark of a great volunteer is the time they give when it isn't.

***Submitted on 8 September 2005 by Rosalie White, American Radio Relay League, Field & Educational Services, Newington CT USA***

Almost everyone knows that Amateur (ham) Radio operators handle communications during disasters -- that includes the 900 "hams" who have volunteered to handle messages for Red Cross and other first responders to Katrina. Katrina has brought some unique challenges to Amateur Radio operators. Last week the large hospital company, HCA Inc., put on a rescue operation, hiring 20 helicopters to airlift around 1,400 patients and staff people, many from Tulane University Hospital. HCA airlifted Amateur Radio operators from Tallahassee, also, to handle radio messages so that the helicopters would not have midair collisions! This unusual system worked perfectly.

***Submitted on 8 September 2005 by Kris Martinson, American Red Cross, Youth & Volunteer Coordinator, Rochester, MN USA***

Long before we knew the level of destruction that Katrina would cause, our chapter volunteers were calling asking how soon we could get them deployed so that they could be there to help. Once the needs were known our volunteers couldn't wait to go and offer whatever help they could. Within a few days, we logged close to 250 new volunteers wanting to train so that they could also join the efforts. Our Minnesota community has rallied to contribute almost \$200,000.00 so far -- and that does not include groups and organizations still planning collections. We had a young mom and her 3 year daughter come in to sharpen pencils for our training, children holding lemonade stands, and families bringing in piggy banks. Everyone wants to do what they can. It is an extremely exhausting and overwhelmingly heart warming time to be a part of the world of volunteers. I hope this helps us tackle some of those "maybes" that Susan writes of this month.

***Submitted 8 September 2005 by Rustie Brooke, Wall Street Rising, New York City USA***

Kudos to John Throop and AVA (for a timely and action-oriented disaster response. Their email blast and web remarks are much appreciated.

**Submitted 8 September 2005 by Susan Pabon, PTA, Volunteer, NC USA**

After watching the blame game and the pessimistic views on the TV, it was a delight to read your optimistic and hopeful view of how we as a country may be pulled tighter together after such a horrendous natural disaster. I will share it with many!

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