

Everyday People Changing the World

BY SANDRA ROHRSTAFF

Last August, when Hurricane Isaac was threatening landfall in Gulf Coast states, a friend of mine volunteered to go to Florida/Alabama as part of the Red Cross Disaster Relief Operation. He posted his thoughts on Facebook and I was moved by his writings that gave a peek into his thoughts and details of his experiences. He talked about being nervous as he started his journey, the chaos of getting hundreds of volunteers from all over the US processed and assigned to tasks; the day-to-day (or, often, hour-by-hour) uncertainty of what he would be doing as the communities' needs changed. Here is his story.

Day 3 – Just got notified I am assigned to a shelter in the inner city of Tampa. Shelter officially opens today at 4pm. My team will be working 8pm – 8am shifts. Expecting 3,000 – 5,000 people at this shelter. Wish me luck!

Hanging out at the local chapter observing the Operations Room for something this scale is amazing. The logistics of receiving all of the shipments of emergency supplies, cots, blankets, comfort kits for all of the possible shelters. A separate staffing command center for dealing with all of the volunteers, where they are staying and where they are assigned. A public relations control center for handling the hundreds of media inquiries daily about sheltering. I'm stunned at the extent of the VOLUNTEERS that do all of this to make sure the community's needs are met even before they know they need them at absolutely no cost. I can't even imagine the millions a day this is costing. For all those out there, support your local Red Cross with even a small donation because if you ever find yourself in the middle of a disaster, you will be glad to see someone in a red and white vest. . . .

Now it is day 4, I am back where I started at a staging area to find out if I'm being redeployed to Mississippi, Alabama or Louisiana or being sent home. Stay tuned...

Finished reprocessing and have now been redeployed to Mississippi. Instructed to leave now by car with a stop in Pensacola then on to the disaster relief site. Isaac now officially a hurricane expected to bring 2 feet of rain and 6-12 storm surges to Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana. Stay tuned...

Hmmm...heading into a hurricane? What am I thinking?



Aug 29 -- So, I hope to find out tomorrow morning where in Louisiana I'm going and I hope Red Cross determines it is safe for us to drive. Right now, it is lights out at the shelter and I hear tornado sirens everywhere. Hurricanes spin off massive amounts of tornados and right now they are right over this county. Forecast is for 10 inches of rain here and over 25 in Louisiana. Flooding more than anything is the legacy Isaac will leave. I'm thankful I'm at church tonight. . . .

Day 5 and my team and I have been driving since 6am. About 5 hours to go to reach our current destination, Hattiesburg, MS. I want to thank everyone for the thoughts and prayers as they are welcomed by me and especially those I will be blessed to help as we continue this deployment. Stay tuned . . .

Aug 30 -- Day 6 begins and a rough night at the staff shelter. Isaac has made it ashore with the center over Louisiana. However the heavy storms and rain bands that spin off are directly over Mississippi. At briefing this morning, those of us who were redeployed to Louisiana are now being assigned here as several thousand people will be forced to new shelters as a result of flooding. Tornado right now on the ground about a mile from here and we are all in the basement of the church. Stay tuned

Lots of tornados today and heavy rain in Hattiesburg, MS. Announcement of new shelters being made every hour to take care of the thousands forced from their homes. I've been assigned to a shelter opening at the Warren County Church of Christ in Vicksburg, MS which is about 140 miles NW of here. However, unsafe to leave because road in is close to a dam that is about to burst. Efforts are being made to release pressure on the dam. Until declared safe, Red Cross will not let us leave. Stay tuned...

A Red Cross Disaster Operation is an ever changing living thing. Our team, freshly assigned to Vicksburg, MS and on our way have now received new instructions that we are needed to open a new shelter in Greenville, MS.



Day 7 begins unexpectedly. Drove 4 hours last night in rough weather arriving at midnight to meet some of the most down home county staff waiting to brief us. Did our walk through and inspection of facility, left 2 of us here to prepare for opening in am setting up cots for 1,000, placing signs, getting kitchen ready for food, etc and got in bed at 2:30 am. Back up at 6:30 to get to the site for an 8 am briefing. County emergency management officials say power was restored overnight and they have decided to close the shelter. Open for a quick 10 minutes. Better to be prepared! Now we await word of our next destination while we nap on our choice of 1,000 cots.

Eating some late dinner in downtown Hattiesburg. Trying the Duck & Rabbit Risotto. It is awesome.

End of day 7 and I'm back in Hattiesburg, MS awaiting new deployment. If there are no sheltering opps open, I'm going to switch to damage assessment or client case work so I can get out in the field and help people one on one. Yeah, tonight's staff shelter is in a dorm at Ole Miss. A bed instead of a cot!! I am truly blessed. Never thought I would be moving into college at my age. Stay tuned...(oh, and enjoy Isaac's rain up north!)

End of day 8 and I have been sent to Baton Rouge, LA. Another large scale relief operation in full swing. Just as we arrived, news broke of a local dam in imminent danger of failing and a mandatory evacuation of all towns down river. 8,000 National Guard troops and trucks are everywhere. I guess i should be careful what I wish for because it looks like I'm going to be real busy with new shelters opening. Briefing at 8 am. Stay tuned...

A Red Cross team from South America here to help. That's awesome!

Shelter Operations. You can see on the wall the new shelters starting to go up.



Day 10 starts after a long day opening a Mega shelter to hold 750 people at a working movie studio in Baton Rouge. People have been coming all night as other shelters are closing and we have to find people a home. A Texas Baptist Church has brought in 2 really nice air conditioned outdoor shower facilities AND a 2 laundry facilities where you just drop off your clothes and their volunteers wash, dry and fold them. They are not associated with the Red Cross. Amazing to see so many come together to help.

8,000 National Guard troops here to help. River expected to crest late tonight.

Day 13 and I wanted to tell you all about what happened here yesterday. So, I just copied my notes and pasted it here. Sorry it is long...

Sept. 5, 2012
Lamar Dixon Exposition Center
Gonzales, LA
DR 734-13

Meet Erica. Erica is a 23 yr old single lady who, ironically enough, found her way to our shelter after being forced to leave her mom's home 3 days ago due to severe domestic abuse and violence, not because of the effects of Hurricane Isaac.

Erica arrived yesterday afternoon having been dropped off by an Ascension Parish Sheriff. She carried everything she owned including a laundry basket of dirty clothes, a tub containing her school books, a book bag with her makeup and a laptop computer that is very special to her.

Erica is completing her high school education online through a school in Illinois and plans to attend a southern university to get a degree in education for children with

specials needs. Despite the environment she was in and being homeless for several days and without the basic necessities of life, Erica was determined to get her homework done on time regardless of where she was or what her circumstances were. She was in constant fear of her tub of school materials being taken from her.

I got to meet Erica immediately when she registered and I helped her set up her cot and organize her things. They had to be placed just so. When I took her to her cot and told her I had two pillows and a couple blankets for her, Erica looked concerned and simply asked "How much?". It was hard to fight back the tears when I told her all Red Cross services are free and I saw the smile go from ear to ear. I got the biggest hug I have ever received.

When Erica sat down on the bed and started to settle in, I told her dinner was being served and asked her if I could show her the dining area. She whispered "Is it free, too?" And I whispered "Of course!". As she stood up, Erica took my arm and I proudly escorted her to dinner. You see, this was the first meal she had in 3 days. We were serving chicken fajitas, corn, peaches and a brownie.

I got Erica settled in and set her food down and gave her my best 5 star restaurant description of the meal which made her laugh. I stayed with her while she ate playing hide and seek with her drink promising I would get her safely to her new home. Erica absolutely loved the strawberry Capri Sun drinks and the brownie, so I snuck her an extra of each.

After dinner, Erica got a Red Cross comfort kit with shampoo, soap and all the necessities and took a hot shower. In the meantime, we were concerned where she would go when the shelter closes, so we spoke with the Sheriff on duty and got the number to a battered women's shelter in Baton Rouge. The Red Cross nursing and mental health staff went to work and after some red tape, we got her a bed for at least 45 days where she will be safe, clean and fed.

When we broke the news to her, Erica was in tears. I told her we had a cab on the way and she would be going that same night. So, we gathered all her belongings and I sat outside with her eagerly waiting for the cab. I was assigned to ride with her and help her get settled in the new place and Erica talked my ear off all the way there - asking me what the stuff was outside the cab, where we were at and how long till we got there.

Once we arrived, I helped Erica get settled and again arranged her things just so. It was time to say good bye to someone I just met but felt like I have known a long time. But before I left, I wanted a picture with Erica to have of someone I will never

forget.

By the way, Erica is blind.

She is completing school on a braille computer and books printed in braille.

God bless you Erica, you will be sensational.

End of Day 13 and as I near the end of my deployment (I officially go home Saturday!), I thought I would share a few stats from the Red Cross Disaster HQ in Port Allen, Louisiana, and how many people's lives can be changed by a few volunteers giving back. Hurricane Isaac has affected 13,480 homes in the State of Louisiana. The Red Cross opened 41 shelters and provided 24,530 overnight stays. By way of shelter operations and Emergency Response Vehicles, the Red Cross provided 645,000 meals in addition to 5,000 clean up kits for Louisiana residents. This does not include the assistance provided in Florida and Mississippi. As you can see, a Disaster Relief Operation is a huge undertaking and all services are provided free of charge to those affected. I am blessed to be a part of this organization and I have learned a lot and grown exponentially as a result. Thank you to the Red Cross for allowing me to do so and I wish safe travel and best wishes to the many new friends I have met in the last 13 days.

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