

Feature Issue on Disaster Preparedness and People with Disabilities

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Katrina: A Story of Survival and Papa Joe's New Community

by Jeff Ridgeway

The night that people along the Gulf Coast entered the shelters, evacuating cities in the path of Katrina, no one could possibly have known the carnage and devastation this storm would bring to their lives. To say that Katrina was a monster of a storm would be sugar-coating it. When daylight came and the storm was over it was time to begin the process of finding who was dead and who was alive, and what was still standing, if anything.

A few days after the storm, when the full effect of what was lost was truly being realized, I got a call asking if I could possibly get up to Tuscaloosa, Alabama the next day (I live in Mobile) where some of the evacuees were. Upon arriving in Tuscaloosa I was met by the advisor of People First of Alabama, Vicki Turnage, who began to fill me in on what People First had already started to do. People First members, with support from the Arc and Ability Alliance, had already obtained funds for the folks to visit a local mall to shop and have lunch. But there were many other immediate needs for our new friends.

One of the first things we did was to meet at a church that had opened their doors to the group. Almost every agency involved in the relief effort, the minister from the church, and representatives from agencies providing supports for individuals with disabilities came to the meeting. We asked evacuated self-advocates, staff, and their families what they needed. They were all ages, from grade school to senior citizens. They numbered 65. Twenty-five were from group homes and apartments, and ten staff and their families were from St. Bernard Parish in New Orleans. In that meeting I saw something happen that I don't know if I'll ever see again. In a meeting of 24-28 people all representing their own version of government, and members of the local and state People First groups (who actually called the meeting), the red tape book was thrown over in the corner. We focused on the immediate needs with one mind and voice. I'm glad the Good Lord let me live long enough to see that.

After all the assignments were divided up, everyone chipped in from their departments, offering computers, clothes, information on loved ones, beds, cigars/ cigarettes, jobs, apartments and homes, fax machines, copiers, and e-mail access. After that day we met in small meetings, but still kept working on welcoming our new friends to the community and supporting them to begin to rebuild their lives. Boxes began to arrive with clothes, shoes, school supplies for the kids, and much more. Ladies from the community brought food. A van was loaned to the evacuees for transportation to places like Wal-Mart to get the things they needed right away.

I met a lot of the survivors. One particular man named Joe, "Papa Joe" everybody called him, stands out. People First had put together a survey to find out just what folks needed, both immediate and long-term. I noticed that on the "want" question he wanted a brown hat with a wide brim, so I asked

Vicki to stop by a western store on the way home. The next day Papa Joe got his brown hat with a wide brim. How could I not make sure he got his hat – this man had just lost every- thing he had except the clothes on his back. The smile on his face when he opened up that box was worth 10 million bucks to me.

When I left, the kids were in school, some of the people were in day pro- grams, and some had jobs so they didn't have to sit doing nothing. (We really hated to use day programs, but it was what we had, and sometimes we have to use what's out there, especially during this emergency.) The church is not a home, but we are trying to embrace our new neighbors in our community and advocate for them to have their homes back and support them in their steps to the rebuilding of their lives.

While it was most certainly tragic that so many lost homes, jobs, even loved ones to the storm, what was sense- less, irresponsible, even on the brink of torturous, was the poor response from officials because of bureaucratic red tape. Today I call on every member of Congress to go forth and call for a dras- tic reduction in red tape in getting help to the people who need it when they need it and where they need it, without the breakdown of communications and delay of help. Let's not let another American die waiting.

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