



## Personal Leadership: A Story from Katrina-Ravaged New Orleans

### 1.) Personal Leadership: A Story from Katrina-Ravaged New Orleans

In April, one of my clients drove down to New Orleans with her church group as a volunteer to help the people there. It started me thinking how we can each make a difference. Often we expect large, organized institutions to step in to make things right. But, what can actually make a difference is our own personal leadership in taking action. Here is Bonnie Stone's story:

During the week of April 8-16, I embarked on a mission trip with my church to New Orleans. We took a team of 10 adults and 15 youth (all high-schoolers) to assist in serving the community during their crisis and rebuilding homes. The devastation still present in the area is beyond my words.

Our assignment was two-fold: construction on homes in a small Spanish-speaking community, and labor in a distribution center. Our post was St. Bernard Parish, which was the area directly adjacent to where the levy broke after the storm. There still is no water or electricity in the community. The area is roughly 30 miles long, and there is little evidence of prosperous life throughout. We noticed no cats, dogs, squirrels, or even birds. Occasionally, you will see a seagull fly over. The area is surrounded by bodies of water, and because New Orleans is below sea level, the floods from the storm and the flooding from the broken levy brought the water level to over thirty feet in some areas of the community. The next time you pass a Wal-Mart store, notice the "W" on the Wal-Mart sign at the top of the front of the building. The water level was at the top of the "W" in this area of the community. That may be a strange description for some, but one that is easily identifiable to most.

There are families trying to survive in this community. Most fit into these categories:

- Families living outside the area in hotels, with friends, driving into the community daily to work on their homes (some driving as much as three hours one way).
- Families trying to live in or near their properties, either in tents or FEMA trailers.

### Tent City Families

Families living in "tent cities" (make-shift homes in the parking lots of abandoned Walmart stores, grocery stores, or businesses like Home Depot--all completely shut down from the storm). These families are still waiting to hear if they are going to qualify for a FEMA trailer, or waiting for their trailers to be hooked up and inspected for use. Some simply have no extended families or no where else to go, and have not qualified for a trailer for various reasons. One woman stated, "I don't qualify for a trailer because I was renting. I wasn't a land owner so I don't get a trailer. I'm living in a tent on a canal that is full of sewage."



### **Commuting to Home**

And there are families that keep returning to the area, who are permanently displaced, but with a sense of disbelief and denial. They are still in shock. Some are returning for the first time even as we speak. While we were walking the area at the broken levy position, a van pulled up. The woman got out of her car and said to us, "Do you see that overturned car over there? Do you see that roof top lying on the ground? That is my home. I left the night of the storm with my toothbrush. There was food in my refrigerator and some lights still on. I expected to be coming back home."

### **Living in the City of New Orleans**

There are wandering folks as well. Those who were renting before the storm, and those in such a state of mental and physical crises that they have lost their sense of direction or belonging.

To further the confusion for everyone, it is next to impossible to produce forms of identification that are needed to qualify for assistance or housing. One woman in exasperation stated to me, "I have \$276 in the bank. I can't get it because I have no ID. I can't get another driver's license without a social security card. I can't get a social security card without a birth certificate. I can't get applications for any of it because I don't have any way of receiving mail. I have no residence, no mailbox, and all of my identification was washed away. I can't prove to anyone that I exist!"

The physical devastation looks much like it would the day after the storm, except that everything is dry now instead of wet. There is mold, mildew, and toxic wastes so strong in some areas that your eyes burn as you drive your vehicle through the neighborhood. The debris from homes being gutted is still piling up along the street curbs. One woman noted that she repeatedly gets depressed each morning she crosses into her yard to continue gutting her home. Because the debris is not being removed, she must view her destroyed photo albums, memorabilia, and home furnishings every day. She said, "If they would just take it away, I might start to heal."

The emotional devastation continues, as the residents of this area are hungry for listening ears. I sat down during lunch with one woman who said, "It feels so good to not be eating alone. I want to tell you my story. It helps. I have to tell it. Someone has to hear it." She cried as she told me her story. Throughout the week, she told her story again and again, as our teenagers listened and hung on her every word. By the end of the week, she seemed to be walking a little lighter and was laughing and hugging us each day.

The suicide rate is very high in this area. For those distributing canned and boxed foods (there are no fresh foods available), we were using the razor knives to open the boxes and were told that when we were not handling the knives, we must hide them from sight. We were told that some folks would try to take them and use them to hurt themselves. One man came in to the center (keep in mind that the distribution center is set up under a large tent in an abandoned parking lot) very depressed. He stated, "There is no reason for you to be here. People have false hope."

As you drive along these neighborhoods you still see overturned and rusted vehicles. You will sporadically see parts of a roof top hanging from trees, but many trees are overturned. At one point, I spotted a pine tree that was completely parted down one side, and all of the now dried, tarnished branches were facing completely horizontal, and to the south, as if it were reaching out to hug something. The water had rushed by the tree so fast that the trees growth had petrified into this position. In death, it gave testimony to waters in excess of 100 miles an hour.

### **A Hope Chest as Life Preserver**

I met a woman who floated out of her house on her hope chest. She had weathered the storm, and was completely surprised by the floods from the levy. She and her mother both rushed with the waters out of her house and into the streets, now rivers, eventually coming to a stop on a rooftop. From there a boat picked her up. Her story continues by way of a military truck, a military plane, a bus, and a passerby car driven by a stranger. During the course of her escape, she was one of the folks stranded on the Interstate for 3 days. Her feet were so bloody and broken that someone gave her diapers to wear on her feet.

There is testimony from a woman who survived the infamous nursing home abandonment in St. Bernard's Parish. She was sitting in her wheel chair on the second floor of the nursing home watching the water rise. It reached her neck before it stopped. For four days she sat in her wheelchair naked, the force of the water stripping her clothes from her body. Debris, sewage, and corpses floated in the water around her. This is her story.

There is Sandy, and Ruby, and Evelyn, and Brenda, and Pep, and Gilda. They all share similar stories and a sense of community with one another. Many are very alone. And amazingly enough, many do carry a sense of gratitude for the small things that church and civic organizations are doing. We often heard statements like, "Thank you so much for being here and giving us food today. It really does mean a lot. If it weren't for you, we might not eat today." I cannot attempt to understand the magnitude of this type of crisis on our country, but many of these people feel abandoned and ignored. And it would appear that we, as a nation, are not equipped to handle a crisis of this magnitude.

### **Rebuilding Lives**

Our construction team went into a home that had already been gutted, and hung drywall. Before, you could walk in the front door, and look straight through to the back yard. By the end of the week, the rooms had once again been formed. Two of the little girls that once lived there came running into their small home and ran to their "room" and said, "Ta Da!!!!" giggling with so much joy that their home was taking shape. Some team before us cleaned out the home, and some team after us, hopefully, will paint the rooms.

And this is how the rebuilding of a torn community happens. We found a yard where a team had put in yard posts, so we finished by applying the fencing. There is no system for coordinating the rebuilding. It is done by folks on their vacations, who wander into the area, pray for guidance and direction, find a project, and take hold for a week. And as you look at the ongoing devastation, and the slow pace of the renewal, you wonder what generation will actually see the community whole again.



At this time, there still is not adequate drinking water available. It wasn't until our third day at the distribution site that a trailer came in with cans of drinking water. We were allowed to give families six cans of water. Some were so thirsty for water that they popped the tops on the cans and chugged the water right there in the line. By the time they reached the end of the distribution line, they were once again out of water. We stood behind the make shift counters saying, "You may have one bag of rice. You may have two cans of corn. You may have one box of tuna and macaroni." In our land of plenty, how is this possible?

Our teenagers were gripped by the stories and their heartstrings were permanently stretched. They matured in ways no one conceived prior to this trip. We all were changed. I would like to thank all the people who financially supported this mission and who also prayerfully kept us in their thoughts. On the third day, I was so devastated by the condition of these families that I called Megan Kirchberg in the Div. 2 office, which contacted Becky Bowman, with The Foundation. I was awarded an immediate Comfort for Kids grant that allowed us to buy diapers, wipes, and toys for the small children in this community. Keep in mind that over 1000 families enter this distribution center daily, seeking aid. There were two centers and the Div. 2 office that sent supplies or financial contributions to this mission as well. Thank you to everyone for your help! One person might not be able to change the world, but I saw evidence that you can change the world of one person. One day at a time.

### Community

Our particular team, from Emmanuel Baptist Church, in Huntingtown, Maryland, went on this trip by faith that we would be spiritually guided to where we were needed. While we wanted to touch the lives of others, our own lives were changed. When you walk outside your circle of comfort and you experience the pain of a fellow human being as your own, your sense of community is developed in new ways. You see diversity as only a small matter, and the human condition as the state in which we all exist together. Or so it should be.

Bonnie Stone  
April 20, 2006

*This is a story of how 25 people made a difference. How can you make a difference? What do you need to do to exercise your personal leadership and make an impact on lives in your own backyard?*