

Disaster 101: Lessons Learned from Katrina

By Marilyn Lewis

When I saw the televised reports of busloads of Katrina survivors arriving in Houston, I knew I had to get involved in the relief effort. I emerged from the experience with some observations on this business of disaster relief, and I learned some lessons about myself, as well.

My road to post-disaster Hell began with a brief orientation at Reliant Center. The Red Cross worker gave us a quick run down on the situation, warning us not to refer to the evacuees as victims, but as “clients.” They might be angry, she said—don’t take it personally. And they will probably smell bad.

That was pretty much the extent of my training. I got a FEMA badge and some colorful wristbands that got me past various checkpoints during the days to come. I arrived at the George R. Brown Convention Center not knowing quite what to expect. Later, friends who saw some of the relief activities on television would tell me they simply couldn’t watch, that they would reach for the remote and make it go away. But you can’t do that when you’re part of the picture. Part of me wanted to leave, to change channels and go home. Yet we human beings have strange adaptation skills. We become conditioned to new environments in a short time. We cope. I told myself that I could handle all kinds of challenges. So, I did what I did, day after day, and it was a mind-numbing experience at the time. But I still have flashbacks that make me weep.

A sea of blue mattresses, thousands of them, covered with people who had been through Hell and it wasn’t nearly over yet. Storm survivors huddled together, or curled up alone, or sitting and staring into space, as if they thought about it long enough they could turn back the clock. Lines formed everywhere, serpentine gatherings of humanity awaiting the most basic of services, from a simple meal to a tetanus shot. In the restrooms toilets overflowed and sewage seeped into the main room. The stench was awful.

Contrary to popular opinion, thousands of Katrina-relief workers were not volunteers, but paid employees. My “employer” had contracts with FEMA for the post-hurricane rebuilding effort, a connection that justified their cash outlay for “paid volunteers.” The staffing agencies that recruited workers had basically put out a cattle call *after* the survivors arrived. This produced the largest unskilled labor pool in the city of Houston, supervised by an uncoordinated effort between FEMA and the Red Cross. It seemed that policies and procedures changed hourly, all day long, all week long, always.

Apparently, disaster breeds disaster.

I had been hired to help storm survivors put their information on paper and apply for assistance. I worked twelve-hour days, minimum, seven days a week, for the duration of the relief effort.

Handling applications for assistance is a high-tech process, and when the computers aren't working, neither are the paid volunteers, and the clients are just hanging out. I spent most of the first week wandering around the convention center, often going out to the loading dock for some fresh air. Sometimes I sat in the dining room and visited with my coworkers and our clients. The PA system blasted us with announcements. *A new shipment of diapers and formula is now available for distribution on the ground floor. Dinner will be served at six o'clock. School busses have now arrived. Please meet your children right away.* Again, I would wander out to the loading dock. And always, every day, when the last yellow bus had come and gone, I saw a few unmet children, shifting their new backpacks from shoulder to shoulder, waiting. *Will the parents of so-and-so please come get your child?*

There were a few working computers where clients could search for housing and jobs, social services of all kinds, and with their hearts full of hope they could try to connect with missing relatives and friends, some of whom they might find in Houston, perhaps right here in the convention center amidst the ebb and flow of those who wandered, as I did, from floor to floor, just to pass the time of day. Mostly, we all sat at long rows of tables in the dining area and waited. It was a way of life.

I made friends with a young man, let's call him Ben, from the lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. He was a coworker as well as a client. (Several contractors on my team were storm survivors.) In the chaos of evacuation, Ben had been separated from his family. Ben had found relatives in different shelters across the country, but still had not found his brother. In the early days of our friendship, I would see him several times a day, and ask about the brother. He always said "Nothing yet." As time went by, I didn't have to voice the question, I would see him, and he would just shake his head or shrug his shoulders.

From time to time, a scream would penetrate the noisy chatter in the dining hall, and if we looked in its direction, we'd witness an actual "reunification." The lost and found of humanity joined together. Ben would look away. And for the first time in my life, I truly understood how one person's extreme joy can cause another to feel so much sorrow.

Finally, we went to work, though the computers continued to crash. The Red Cross gave each caseworker a packet of debit cards and some intake forms. The forms were simple enough: head of household, address at time of storm, family members and their ages, and a designation for each person: M, I, or K (as in Missing, Injured, or Killed). Plus some fill-in-the-blank options about their evacuation.

It was chaos among chaos. Someone made the seemingly-wise decision to move management and labor off site, making us less accessible but maybe more productive.

My team went to a church in Southeast Houston on the edge of Sims Bayou. I left the convention center for the last time about eight o'clock on a Friday night, wondering where I'd parked my car. I jaywalked across the street and came face to face with a man who fell to his knees and cried at my feet.

“I’ve lost my home, my family, my business, everything,” he said. “My life is over.”

That did it for me. Our clients were no longer people with paperwork. They were real, their experiences were real, and their losses were too much to bear. I sat down in the middle of the street and held his hand and cried with him.

One of the caseworkers came to my aid and persuaded him to go inside, have some dinner, get some help, a good night’s sleep—and things would look better in the morning. I remember, still standing in the street, thinking that things probably wouldn’t look better for him for many mornings to come, but certainly things could not look worse. Could they?

Saturday morning, I reported for duty at the new location. As I drove alongside the bayou, a fog rose from the water and all I could see was the golden dome of the church. As I drew nearer, I could make out a ghostly crowd of people encircling the building. As I would soon discover, some had camped out in the parking lot overnight, just to get a good place in line. They were hungry, thirsty, sobbing, sweating, mosquito-bitten, and generally miserable—with hours between them and a face-to-face meeting with a caseworker. The parking lot was filled with horses and mounted police, media trucks and news reporters, ambulances, and paramedics, HPD cars and officers—and politicians trying get in front of the TV cameras.

The church, newly constructed and still without pews, was filled with rows of makeshift folding tables and chairs, ready for workers and clients. The computers were still iffy. When they were up and running, a lot of us sat idle because there were more workers than clients. The fire department kept strict controls on occupancy. It’s their job. It made us inefficient but kept us safe. Bottom line, we needed a larger space. We weren’t going to get it. And day after day people stood in line and waited in the summer heat, and night after night they slept on the asphalt, waiting their turns, hopefully the next day.

They poured out their stories to us, tearfully, as if voicing their experiences finally forced reality to consciousness. *My house is gone. I taught myself to swim in sewage water, fifteen feet deep, because I didn’t want to sink and die. I spent three days on my roof, scratching mosquito bites, watching the wind slam birds into fences and buildings. Saw dead people float by. Saw parts of dead people float by. Saw my furniture float by. No food or water. Broke my arm. Lost my baby. Prayed a lot. Don’t believe in God no more.*

We cried with our clients, but after a while felt overwhelmed. As time went on, and I say this with sadness, we became somewhat weary of their tales of woe. The Red Cross encouraged us to take “Mental Health Breaks,” as needed. We did. Sometimes, during my breaks, I’d see Ben, and I’m suddenly wearing the question about his brother on my face. He would still shrug or shake his head. I’d circle the building, get a bottle of soda, and then I’d sit on the edge of the bayou and watch the water ripple. Anything to keep from going back in. Not now, not yet, just a few minutes more. Meanwhile, some idiot is encircling the golden dome, making announcements with a bullhorn. “You can expedite your applications by going online.”

Not one person who camped on the asphalt whipped out a wireless laptop or hand-held gadget. I went back inside.

Our computers continued to crash, and data entry became a thing of the past, at least temporarily. This created a lot of room for fraud. We had switched from issuing debit cards to writing checks. Without the ability to verify applicants via our so-called computer system, an applicant could go through the line more than once, undetected, and get more than one payment. We couldn't verify driver's license numbers or addresses. When the computers were finally up for an extended period, the data-entry staff went into overtime, ultimately revealing enough fraudulent applications to require some revisions to the procedures and the formation of a special HPD task force. Immediately after this happened, more than two-dozen people were arrested in the first few days of activity.

Much to my chagrin, I got reassigned to another position, which meant that I'd lost the opportunity to talk to clients. My new job meant approving applications or sending them back to the caseworker for more info, or in some cases, having the "client" arrested.

If the person looked familiar, if I thought they'd been through the line before, I would send the application back to intake to recheck the address. I learned which New Orleans ZIP codes were not in the disaster zone. I studied client's faces and compared them to I.D. photos. I studied identification cards endlessly. I learned how to recognize a fake I.D. If the client got fidgety when I did this, I knew we were in trouble. Sometimes the applicant would get up and flee, leaving me with a flea-market Louisiana driver's license. That was the case with a fifteen-year old client who claimed to have five children. (More kids, more money.) Some of these imposters were sure they could get through the system. They would sit patiently while I studied the paperwork and the I.D. If I determined the application was fraudulent, I took my next steps. This meant sending the application on for processing, while signaling one of the undercover cops posed as a volunteer, and having the check issued and handed it to me. Two undercover cops would follow me as I carried the booty to the imposter. I would ask him or her questions about whether he or she understood the ramifications of accepting this check. They would always say yes, accept the check, and sign for it. I'd walk away to the sound of handcuffs clicking. After the first time, I never looked back.

Apparently, as word got out that the Red Cross was giving away money and flea-market I.D. cards became more available, we got increasing numbers of these imposters. We had very little, if any, sensitivity left for our "real" clients. We were tired of their rooftop stories and tired of being scammed, sick and tired, literally, of being sick and tired. My coworkers and I had caught all kinds of illnesses from our environment, ranging from respiratory infections to stomach and intestinal cramping; some of us unable to keep food down or to even eat anything at all—when we weren't coughing and sneezing and suffering from headaches.

As we neared the end of September, we had really grown irritable and impatient and had evolved from a new and closely-bonded group of friends to a gaggle of raw nerves,

snapping at each other from time to time. Then, believe it or not, we would find some comic relief in our routines, and we would settle back into our hard-earned friendships overlook petty annoyances.

We made fun of each other. We told jokes. About the Rabbi and the Priest walking into a bar and this guy had a parrot on his shoulder . . . and so it went. It was our own brand of comic relief, born of necessity, and I won't repeat the jokes because no one else, in another place and time, would find any of them funny. As they say, you had to be there.

One day I felt particularly grouchy and intolerant, and a nice-looking gentleman came across the room. I'd met him before, he was a caseworker, and I saw that he had a piece of paper and a pen in his hand, obviously wanting me to approve a client application, and I'm about to snap at him. I'm busy, and other people are available to help him, I'm overwhelmed, why doesn't he go somewhere else? I'm about to say so. I'm slow with the response, though. He hands me the pen and a blank piece of paper.

"Would you write down your phone number?" he asked. "I think you're sweet, and when this is all over with, I'd like to take you out to dinner."

Sometimes it pays to be slow. My coworkers thought this was just too funny and started a slew of jokes about Disaster Dating Services. But, as I said, you had to be there.

Every day the lines got shorter and our traditional end-of-day applause erupted earlier and earlier. Rumor spread that the facility would only be open another month or so. That's when one of my coworkers returned from her break, cell phone in hand, and wearing a dazed expression.

"They're evacuating Galveston," she said.

Everyone within earshot stopped all activity, looking very much like they'd been captured on film through a camera lens, frozen in time.

If Houston took a direct hit from Hurricane Rita, what would happen? Don't think about it, we all told one another. Don't think, period.

Two days later we shut down and Houstonians began to try to evacuate the city. As I left the church that night, I looked across Sims Bayou. No fog. No surrealism. Just a dead-still, breathless, hot evening. The parking lot was littered with empty food and beverage containers, soiled diapers, cigarette butts, and (watch your step) horse manure. In a new frenzy of activity, church employees boarded windows, dismantled lawn tents, and closed shop.

I waved goodbye to Ben and wondered where he was going. He averted his eyes. No shrug. No shaking his head. He didn't wave back. He turned away, leaving me with an emotion that to this, day, I cannot describe. I do know that it's something not just the

opposite of hope, but something as far away from hope as one can ever go, a black hole in another universe.

One of life's lessons, learned over and over again—realizing that not all emotions have descriptions.

I hope that relief organizations and staffing agencies and city officials have learned their lessons from this experience, that Disaster 101 has taught them the need for well-established policies and procedures. The need for establishing a database of skilled workers who are ready and able when the time comes. The need to provide, on a moment's notice, reliable computers, front-end fraud prevention, better life-rebuilding resources. We live in an era of global climate change that will continue to challenge us in serving people displaced by enormous catastrophes. We will do this more and more, and we must do it much better. During Katrina relief, when people had lost everything but their dignity, we managed to take that away from them, too—our lack of preparedness imposed undue hardships on storm survivors. They came to Houston from the Hell of a destroyed city, and Hell continued when they got here. Like Dante's Inferno, it was just another level.

And I learned lessons, too, about myself.

These days I wake up and have greater appreciation for all that I've been blessed with. A place to live, enough to eat, loved ones, good health. I want for nothing. I have everything I could possibly need. Just a few weeks after my relief work ended, my beautiful granddaughter was born, and I wept with pure joy and gratitude, and sorrow for the babies lost to the storm. Is it always such that joy and grief go hand in hand?

It would take another year for me to revisit the Golden Dome at Sims Bayou, and it was a quiet afternoon as I sat and watched the water again. Those passing by, enjoying the beautiful sunlit September day, would look at me, and we would exchange smiles. On such a bright autumn day you can do that, and never concern yourself with each other's thoughts. I sat there on the bayou's banks, recalling friendships made and the kindnesses extended to one another in unexpected ways. Of people offering love to strangers. Of people letting go, laying down their burdens, if only for a moment. If you have ever held another person's pain just briefly, you have learned that you don't hand it all back to them. Part of it becomes you, and you have lessened someone's grief, if only by a fraction. The pain you have taken away from them and kept for yourself turns into something else, some other kind of feeling; but, again, not all emotions have words.