



A Helping Hand from Coast to Coast to Coast

Scouts and Scouters Across America Have Worked Together to Assist in Relief and Recovery Efforts in the Wake of Two Devastating Hurricanes.

By Mark Ray

Scouting

January 2006

On September 15, 2005, President George W. Bush addressed the nation from storm-ravaged New Orleans. He called on existing organizations—specifically churches, union locals, and Scout troops—to help the Gulf Coast recover from Hurricane Katrina.

What the President may not have realized is that hundreds of Scout troops, along with Cub Scout packs, Venturing crews, and Sea Scout ships, were already responding to Katrina, which had devastated the region on August 29. Many more stood ready to help when Hurricane Rita struck Texas and Louisiana nine days after his speech.

Over the past four months, Scouts and Scouters from coast to coast have collected relief supplies, assembled health kits, made flood buckets, cooked meals, staffed emergency shelters, taken in evacuee families, adopted Gulf Coast packs and troops, worked to restore heavily damaged Scout camps, and assisted local council employees who lost their homes. In short, they have embodied the spirit of Scouting.

Paper Plates and Peanut Butter

Just days after Hurricane Katrina left the Gulf Coast, Scout volunteers across American began collecting food, bottled water, and other supplies for hurricane victims. Among them were members of Cub Scout Pack 400 and Boy Scout Troop 400 in Richmond Hills, Ga.

On Labor Day and the following Saturday, the Scouts collected more than 9,000 pounds of relief supplies in front of a local grocery store. Donations included everything from paper plates and peanut butter to toothpaste and baby food—“anything you have to have to feel human and survive,” according to Cubmaster Rick Bensman.

It was a very efficient operation. Scouts distributed supply lists as shoppers entered the store, collected donations as they left, and then wheeled the supplies to a waiting trailer, which had been loaned by a local trucking company.

According to Bensman, the effort went so well that the store ran out of many items. “We emptied their diaper aisle the first day, and I guess we emptied it the second day, too,” he said.

Working Long Days and Loving It

Members of Troop 40 in Meridian, Miss., had helped the American Red Cross after Hurricanes Ivan and Dennis, but nothing could prepare them for the devastation they saw in Biloxi, Miss., the weekend after Katrina passed through.

“It was just horrible looking,” said Rob Corey, a 14-year-old Star Scout. Houses were completely gone, tanker trucks sat on top of cars, trees were down everywhere.

Troop 40 Scouts spent three straight weekends in Biloxi, where they unloaded trucks and distributed food and water to local residents. Working alongside them were volunteers from around the country, as well as members of the Royal Dutch Navy and the Mexican Marines.

Scoutmaster Keith Clifford praised his Scouts for their hard work. “The cars lined up and would come all day long,” he said. “We were unloading trucks at 7 o’clock and worked on through the evening.”

Despite all the hard work, the Scouts enjoyed their time on the coast. “It was fun,” Corey said.

A Shelter from the Storm

Helping out in disasters is nothing new for Venturing Crew 911 of The Woodlands, Texas, just north of Houston. The crew twice helped set up a shelter at McCullough Junior High School when localized flooding forced residents from their homes. They began preparing to do the same thing when Hurricane Rita threatened the Houston area.

This time, however, they faced a different kind of flood: a flood of evacuees from Houston and the Texas coast. Massive traffic jams prevented thousands of people from reaching shelters farther inland—where the American Red Cross had positioned its supplies and volunteers.

Fortunately, the crew is a resourceful bunch. Several of the members are trained as first responders, which allowed the crew to open the shelter without medical support and to handle intake screenings of everyone who arrived, including a premature infant

and a busload of Alzheimer's patients. Many of the Venturers also retain membership in Boy Scout troops and called in fellow Scouts to help. The crew cobbled together a menu from the school's lunchroom supplies and even found a way to stock supply a second shelter. (Venturer Whitney Davis mobilized her church—in the middle of the night—to deliver more food and health kits from a church-run assistance program.)

Within hours of opening, the Scouts and Venturers had served a hot meal to more than 200 evacuees, but that was just the beginning. "When we closed Sunday morning at 10 a.m., we had served over 2,000 meals and helped nearly 600 senior citizens, men and women, boys and girls, kids and babies, plus numerous dogs and cats, two ferrets, an exotic bird, and one turtle get through an ordeal that will not soon be forgotten," Advisor Jay Walker said.

Bob Cargo, a Crew 911 leader who's also director of the local Red Cross branch, was not surprised. "I knew what was going to happen and that the objective was going to be met," he said. "Probably the best run and smoothest run shelter was McCullough."

The Oak Mountain Scouts

Oak Mountain State Park in Alabama features 52 miles of trails, a golf course, three lakes—and an evacuee camp where some hurricane victims may still be living come summer. Thanks to Scouter George Oldroyd, many of those temporary residents are participating in Scouting.

Oldroyd, a political consultant, first got involved at Oak Mountain when his sister-in-law, who was volunteering there, drafted him to help untangle some bureaucratic red tape. He quickly saw the need for organized youth activities, including Scouting. "It seemed like the smartest way to give them some ethical structure, common ideas, a sense of community, and living skills," he said.

Working with the Greater Alabama Council, Oldroyd got Cub Scout-aged boys connected with area packs and organized a Boy Scout troop and Sea Scout ship to serve youth living at the park. About 30 kids have been participating, although the population continues to fluctuate.

Oldroyd said he's especially proud of the older kids, who are forming a youth government in the camp, which may soon become a Law and Government Explorer post. The group is planning a fundraiser to build a survivors' memorial that will stand at Oak Mountain long after they've moved on to permanent homes.

Restoring a Camp—and a Council's Heart

When Camp Tiak opens for business this summer, the Pine Burr Area Council's camp near Wiggins, Miss., will look vastly different than it did a year ago. Hurricane Katrina toppled hundreds of trees on the property and destroyed or seriously damaged many camp buildings.

But the camp *will* open, and that's a testament to the dedication of Scouters across the country. In late October and early November, more than 80 volunteers from the National Capital Area Council in Bethesda, Md.—along with members of the Philmont Staff Association—arrived to help clear downed trees from the property. They'll be followed in the coming months by crews from the Bay-Lakes Council in Oshkosh, Wisc., and the Gulf Stream Council in Tampa, Fla.

"The Scouting community has responded magnificently," said Rob Hofmann, Scout executive of the Pine Burr Area Council. The council even received an offer of help from Warsaw, Poland.

Bill Evans, who coordinated the efforts of the National Capital volunteers, said interest was strong from the outset. "Several people literally spent days working on work and personal schedules, potential travel arrangements, etc., attempting to match up with us," he said. Most of them, whether college students, businesspeople, homemakers, or retirees, succeeded and made the trip to Mississippi.

Although he was overwhelmed by the response from so many Scouters with no direct ties to the Gulf Coast, he wasn't really surprised. "The ideals of Scouting—doing a good turn daily, helping other people at all times, etc.—are not just good for our youth," he said. "There are a lot of adults working in the program who believe in and practice the same ideals themselves."

These efforts just begin to tell the story of how Scouting is making a difference after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. To learn more—and to find out how your unit can help—visit www.goodturnforamerica.org.