

'Please Help Us'

Even here, storm's impact strong

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For those safely tucked away in the Midwest, or even many living along the Gulf Coast, hurricane season is routine.

Watch the news. Pack provisions just in case. Make a few calls to relatives and friends.

But not Hurricane Katrina.

Katrina was different.

On Aug. 29, 2005, the storm rumbled ashore along hundreds of miles of Gulf Coast, packing winds that hit 145 mph.

At first, the winds scoured the coast, ripping homes from foundations, sending casino barges hundreds of feet inland to rest in crumpled hulks and decorating leafless trees with debris plucked from homes and businesses.

Then the levees gave way, filling the urban bowl that is New Orleans with a toxic soup of sewage, chemicals, rotting bodies and snakes.

As the storm approached, people saw familiar images: Bending palms, a once-flat tin roof now curled at three sides and a miles-long trail of headlights as evacuees sought higher ground.

Americans saw human suffering generally found in less developed nations like Haiti or the Congo - images of widespread looting, dead bodies in the streets, tourists trapped in hotels, gun battles in a major city.

They saw the confusion and heard the pleas for help from those stranded on rooftops or in stagnant attics.

"I cried, quite honestly, for a week," said Sharon Hannon of Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries, who spent her childhood in New Orleans. "My husband wouldn't even let me watch the hurricane relief effort. I was quite a mess."

Many Americans couldn't stand by and just watch, because the desperation left in Katrina's wake was so different from past hurricanes.

Thousands were trapped in the New Orleans Superdome. Gangs preyed on survivors and outgunned police.

Along Mississippi's coast, hurricane victims wandered dazed among a latticework of downed trees, construction debris, land scraped so hard by the storm's winds they couldn't find the lots where their homes once stood.

By the thousands, Americans called the Red Cross and asked where to send donations.

Residents of Greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky and Southeast Indiana contributed \$23 million.

A Hyde Park child became a semi-celebrity selling lemonade. Schools held fund-raising events. Moms and dads picked up cases of bottled water and diapers and took them to drop-off centers.

Hundreds of people left the comfort of their homes and made the all-night drive south to deliver supplies, offer prayers, patrol the streets, and start to clean up the mess.

Politics, poorly implemented evacuation plans, 30-foot waves, breached levies, and wind speeds of 145 mph rocked the lives of the hundreds of thousands who fled the Gulf Coast states. Hurricane Katrina left 1,800 dead. And a year later, victims are still being identified.

But with Katrina, people could no longer sit and watch another hurricane without reacting. They offered their homes to survivors and opened their wallets.

For many, too many, it was too late.

'I'M DEAD'

"Save yourself and tell them I'm dead," Benilda "Benny" Caixeta pleaded with her caretaker, Rita Bailey.

Bailey grabbed the cell phone and a small pocket calendar filled with the names and telephone numbers of many of Caixeta's closet friends. Included in that group was Pam Sattari, 45, of Anderson Township.

"Please help us," Bailey implored from New Orleans.

Sattari couldn't believe it.

If anyone would be rescued in New Orleans, surely it would have to be the elderly or those not able to take care of themselves - like her friend, confined to a wheelchair with muscular dystrophy.

Caixeta and Sattari spoke in the days leading up to the storm. They spoke again the day Katrina hit.

"Oh my God, water is coming in," Caixeta told Sattari, a New Orleans native and close friend for 24 years, during their last conversation. "Water."

And that was it.

The line went dead.

Four days after the levees broke, Bailey was rescued from the top floor of the apartment building.

A crew of Brazilian filmmakers found Caixeta's body in her first-floor apartment.

They were not allowed to remove it.

On Oct. 8, Caixeta's body was taken to a makeshift morgue, where it stayed until late December, when it was released to friends.

"I never dreamed in all my life that this would happen. There is always the threat of hurricanes down there. But Benny had a lot of good friends down there and you would have thought that if anyone could have got out of it, it was her," Sattari said.

Caixeta would have been 52 in July.

Sattari has gone home twice to honor her friend. She cries easily when she thinks of how Caixeta died and how her friend begged her caretaker, a woman deathly afraid of water, to save herself.

She still cries when she talks about how a storm so far away could have such an impact here. "I never dreamed I would be part of something like this," she said.

Many others didn't either.

'JUST SO MUCH COURAGE'

"It feels like months, but certainly not 12," said New Orleans native Olga Johnson, who now calls the Cincinnati area home. Until just a few weeks ago, she lived in the basement of her sister's Bond Hill home.

"I came here and I was like, 'Whoa.' It just blew my mind when I realized I was homeless," Johnson said.

Johnson is one of 959 applicants for Federal Emergency Management Agency aid who now live in the Greater Cincinnati area.

"It's hard to believe it has been a year," said Sandra Keiser, a coordinator of evacuee assistance for Catholic Social Services of Southwestern Ohio. "The people who have come here have just so much courage. You know, after all they have been through, they just have so much strength. ...They are just real survivors who have really come through so much more than we imagined. They are survivors, not victims."

Those survivors now live in every state and two territories.

Johnson, who lost at least 10 friends in the storm and spent hours crying in front of the television as she saw footage of other friends begging for help in New Orleans, now lives in a previously foreclosed home in Hamilton, thanks to the efforts by Keiser's group to get people housing. One day, she said, she'd like to call that temporary housing "home."

"The people have really been very nice. I mean really very, very nice. I have met just such beautiful people with beautiful spirits and that has helped me. They offer such nice words and prayers," she said. "I say a prayer every day. I pray for the people down there. I pray for the politicians and hope that nothing else like this can happen in America. ...The thing I want everyone to know is this can happen anywhere. This can happen to you. Hurricane, tornadoes, they happen everywhere you go."

But this one was different.