

RVers help out in disaster

Your Vehicle of Hope

By Carol Tebo

Editor's note: This story was originally published in *Rocking Chair Rebels*, a book of stories by RVers that benefits Escapees CARE, Inc. CARE is a facility where RVers with short or long term health problems may go for assistance while continuing to live in their RV. The story is reprinted here with permission from the author, Carol Tebo.

One of the most compelling motivations for our becoming full-time RVers was to have more freedom and opportunity to be of service to others. Although we had determined that Habitat for Humanity would be our primary service commitment, another vision also tugged at us. Many times Larry and I had heard of a natural disaster and wished that we could just pick up and go help. Then the chance to fulfill our aspiration presented itself.

We were in Americus, Georgia, participating in a Habitat for Humanity blitz-build. Only hours before the joyous dedication of the 20 homes and the transferring of the keys to the happy families, we were all informed of the tornado that cut a deadly swath through the Birmingham, Alabama, area. We knew this was the moment we had imagined many times. We made an immediate decision to go to Birmingham and stay as long as we could be useful.

Birmingham, Alabama

We were advised to approach the local churches, because they are usually involved in the relief effort and are amenable to helping volunteers find a place to set up. I contacted the Birmingham Baptist Association, which coordinated the command center for the entire cleanup effort, and explained that we could offer long-term help. They arranged for us to hook up at a large church, which gave us access to their bathrooms, shower, and laundry facilities.

The tornado that tore through the Birmingham communities may have exceeded the parameters of an F-5, the most powerful storm. The winds, in excess of 320 m.p.h., stripped the bark off trees. No matter how dramatic the images are on the television or movie screen, nothing can prepare you for the actual sight of the decimation such power produces. The way it is consistently expressed by everyone is, "It looks like a war zone!"

Our first day was a stark contrast to the joyous building we had just completed. We operated in a dream-like state as we helped dismantle a house, board by board, and hauled it curbside, forming mountains of debris. The most difficult experience for all of us was finding and setting aside personal items, because they put us in touch with the lives of the people who had lived there.

For three weeks, we systematically moved from property to property, tearing down, raking, loading wheelbarrows, and hauling. We worked alongside wonderful people of all ages from all walks of life. And we met a number of the victims. We listened, hugged, empathized, and soothed. In almost every case, we were profoundly moved by the strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

For the next three weeks, we camped at another church, which had full hookups along one wall unused in 15 years. We spent those weeks ministering to four generations of a family. A bond was formed that will forever be special to all of us.

Spencer, South Dakota

As we were winding up our work in Alabama and looking forward to several weeks of rest, we saw reports of the tornado that leveled the little town of Spencer, South Dakota. No longer could we view it as just another news report. We had witnessed firsthand what it means to the lives of the people affected. We felt certain we should head there actually to the next-door town of Salem.

The Salem National Guard Armory, which was the collection and distribution center for all the donated goods, became our camp spot for the next two weeks. We would play an entirely different role there.

Once more we were in store for an almost incomprehensible sight. This time, however, it was the inside of the armory. The response to the plight of the 300 townspeople was so overwhelming that the huge interior was a sea of clothing, food, toys, and furnishings, with boxes stacked to the ceilings in other rooms, waiting to be sorted.

In addition to giving relief and support to the young woman in charge, including letting her use our trailer as a getaway, we sorted clothing, shelved food, aided victims in selecting items, and helped organize and conduct the culminating three-day rummage sale of excess donations, the proceeds of which, over \$14,000 (that was the final figure after the remains were sold for salvage), went to the Spencer Relief Fund.

During lunch one day at the armory, we were introduced to the South Dakota Lutheran Disaster Relief (LDR) coordinator. She explained the ongoing hardships farmers and ranchers were still enduring as a result of the crippling '96-'97 winter blizzards. So, we headed for Selby, South Dakota, for yet another experience.

High feed and fuel bills, loss of a half-million cattle, miles of mangled fencing, inability to get milk to market, exhaustion, illnesses, and injuries incurred shoveling and clearing, followed by the onset of spring chores, created a debilitating cycle that left many hopeless and unable to cope.

LDR traveled thousands of miles of dirt roads, assessing needs, acquiring supplies, and enlisting volunteer groups to mend fences, repair barns, clear shelter belts, and help give the battered people a jump-start.

With our trailer hooked up at the local church, it was our privilege to participate in that effort for two weeks. Though the hours were sometimes long, and the work physically and emotionally demanding, it was extremely rewarding to see life come back into the eyes of those proud people as they regained hope and the fortitude to carry on.

The deep satisfaction of helping people in their time of greatest need overrode all other considerations and seemed to energize us. When you become part of a community in crisis, you have an opportunity to connect with its heart and soul.

Make your RV a vehicle of hope

We heartily encourage all RVers to turn your RV into a vehicle of hope the next time you hear about an emergency or disaster. RVers are in a unique position. Our mobile, flexible, and self-sustained lifestyle makes it relatively easy for us to just pick up and go help. No special skills are required. Age is not a factor either. We worked alongside many people in their 70s and some even in their 80s.

It is our observation that volunteers who can stay for a protracted period of time are extremely valuable, particularly after the first couple of weeks when the front line of local volunteers are burned out, the out-of-town volunteers have dwindled, and the agencies have withdrawn.

It is when all the hoopla dies down that victims begin to acknowledge the reality of their situation, and a supportive, consistent helping hand is most needed. It is my promise that you could not find anything more satisfying to be doing just then. This is really what life is all about, being vehicles of hope and love to our fellow travelers through life.

Habitat RV Care-A-Vanners have added disaster relief to their Habitat projects. For information, call 800-HABITAT, extension 2316.

To read more of Carol's writings and to learn about her inspirational gift book, *Blueberries from Heaven: A Basketful of Wisdom*, please visit her Web site, *Tebo Tales*.