

## Forty eight hours without relief

At 3:00 A.M. on Sunday morning, September 11<sup>th</sup> I stood outside waiting for my ride to the Newark airport. As Lisa Farkovits pulled up with Doni Farkovits, Michael Dube and six duffle bags filled with children's clothing and toys we wondered if we would be able to fill a real need in the Houston area. That question was answered with a definite yes over the course of the next forty eight hours.

When we arrived in Atlanta for our layover they were showing the memorial ceremonies for 9-11 that were going on at that time in New York. We had left one city that had been crippled by disaster to do our best to assist another city in their time of need.

Upon arrival we went to our host's home, Nava and Gideon Miller, and tried to find a place to donate the clothing. After learning that a number of drop sites had been closed because of the crush of donations, we contacted the Salvation Army. They were equipped to receive donations and needed help answering phones in their makeshift call center.

We spoke with head volunteer Joe Robinson for about ten minutes and received a packet of information and sat in front of phones. We only received a hand full of phone calls from Louisiana evacuees, but this was our first contact with people who simply needed information to help start their lives over.

*"Do you have clothing for me, I used to live in New Orleans?"*

*"What about mattresses, I need a place to sleep?"*

*"How can I get to the distribution center in Pasadena Texas if my car is under ten feet of water in New Orleans?"*

Some questions we could answer, some we could not. The best that we could do was to offer a kind word and a phone number that might get them moving in the right direction.

After we finished at the Salvation Army we made our way over to the George R. Brown Convention center that has been converted in a small city. We put on our bright yellow "Project Compassion" t-shirts and followed directions. People were divided into groups.

*"I need ten people to move beds."*

*"Can I get ten men and ten women to help at the showers?"*

*"We need a group of people to help with the children."*

A man in a bright red shirt reminded us all to smile and repeated this phrase, "You are not here to be served, you are here to serve!" The three of us eventually made our way to the information desk, and more specifically the organization of the paging system. Our main role was to collect information from people who were trying to find another person and bring that announcement over to the PA system. Since we were sitting behind the information desk, people asked us whatever they thought we might know.

*“How do I get a Louisiana license?”*  
*“My birth certificate is lost, can I request a new one?”*  
*“Where is the doctor?”*  
*“Do you have clothing?”*

By the end of the second day we became experts at most of these questions, and other volunteers began turning to us for answers. Most of the time behind the desk was spent speaking with people and trying to get them the information that they needed. We tried to help in any way possible; even driving a family to sign up for potential housing about half an hour away.

It is difficult to describe the sheer enormity of this center. They are able to feed the two thousands residents as well as the one thousand volunteers, without long lines. There are snacks that are kosher, along with fruit and water available all of the time. Around the entire center there are bottles of hand sanitizers to try and prevent the spread of disease from person to person.

The main floor is lined with cots. Each cot or bed is about a foot from another bed. In and around these beds was all of the property that these people owned. Most painful was to watch little children trying to comprehend what was going on all around them. I don't think that these children will be able to process this event for many years.

On the second morning, after minyan and some bagels with Rabbi Gelman, we met with the Chabad disaster coordinator. We gave him one of the bags of children clothing as well as twenty gift cards of one hundred dollars each – ten for Old Navy and ten for Bed Bath & Beyond. The Chabad of Houston is absorbing ten families for the next six months at least. They have arranged apartments, and furniture as well as Day School education for all interested.

The people who are doing most of the volunteering are coming from faith-based communities – Churches, Mosques and Synagogues. The day we arrived, there were at least one thousand Moslem volunteers, with whom we worked closely. It was amazing to see people from every faith community working together in the hope of bringing some relief to the evacuees.

We provided people with information, monetary assistance and a smile. I hope that we provided some relief as well. It will take weeks and months to assess the mid and long term needs of this misplaced community. I can only hope and pray that they are eventually able to receive permanent relief in the long run.

Please check <http://www.farkovits.com/KesherKatrinaFund-HoustonTrip/> for some images of the trip.

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