

Two storms, three communities tied together

Tragedy spurs volunteer hearts in JC

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The deluge that crippled Houston and other parts of Texas has already caught the attention of relief-minded people in the Jefferson City area. And lessons learned after past disasters may help guide future aid, so the best intentions lead to the best results for people who need help.

Communities in Texas have only just begun the long road to recovery after Hurricane or Tropical Storm Harvey — what the storm was and how it destroyed communities depended on where and when it passed over.

Harvey is neither the first time in living memory a tropical storm system has devastated a large swath of the

Gulf Coast, nor the first time Jefferson Citians have stepped up to provide assistance in the aftermath. As Harvey continued to ravage Texas on Aug. 29, that day also marked the 12-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina's landfall and the Jefferson City volunteer relief efforts that storm precipitated.

Over Labor Day weekend in 2005, levee-breached and relief-neglected New Orleans caught much of the national media attention, but Katrina also wiped out entire towns on the coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi.

Katrina's storm surge, the wind-driven wall of water that came ashore and scoured much of Waveland, Mississippi, down to bare concrete foundations was at least 25 feet high, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

At the time, Mary Winter, an attorney with Bartimus, Frickleton, Robertson in Jefferson City, talked with another attorney from Mississippi about Waveland, about how Katrina's eye and the worst of its wind had passed right over it, and about how he thought the town had been forgotten in the coverage he was seeing.

So Winter called Ron Medin and Mark Saucier and said, "Let's figure out a way we can help."

Medin is the general counsel for Central Trust Bank in Jefferson City, and Saucier is coordinator of missions in the chancery office of the Catholic Diocese of Jefferson City.

The trio organized Jefferson City Helps, a 501(c) (3) organization to provide assistance directly to Waveland. Over several trips to the Gulf, Medin said, the organization towed three large trailers at time loaded with supplies for Waveland.

They were by far not the only local organization to get involved with post-Katrina relief efforts; several local churches and Habitat for Humanity did, too, likely among others.

Medin said Jefferson City Helps learned some lessons that can guide Missourians and other outsiders who want to help people affected by Harvey.

“The lesson we learned is one that a lot of relief agencies preach, and that is you need to be careful about what you contribute or what you try to take to a disaster site. Many times you need to wait a while and see what their needs really are,” he said.

“Talk to the people there and ask them what they need. Don’t assume everything you gather up here can be useful there,” Winter added.

Medin’s first trip to Waveland was within two or three weeks of Katrina’s landfall, and he said the town was already “inundated with a lot of things they didn’t need,” like garden hoses and used grills.

Donated clothes were a lot less important than the ability to wash what items people in the community did have, and the only working power and water supply in the town was in a city park. Jefferson City Helps arranged to have washers and dryers installed at the park, Winter said.

“You don’t want to add to their burden by doing things that they’re not ready for yet,” she said. Items like clothes might not only be unhelpful, but figuring out what to do with donations diverts labor from other, more important relief efforts.

“Everyone wants to respond immediately, and oftentimes we fail to realize that the most help is needed long after a lot of the other volunteers have gone back home,” she said.

Her law firm worked with firms in Mississippi for months and maybe even years after Katrina to help people sort through insurance claims. Though people who have insurance probably don’t have policies that cover flood damage, she said, people still have to file claims and try to recover what they can.

“From our experience after Katrina, we learned that the most important thing, especially for young people, is to get them back into a routine, to get back to what is a new normal. That means school,” Henderson Lewis Jr., superintendent of schools for Orleans Parish in New Orleans, told the News Tribune in an email.

Outside volunteers can play a role in rebuilding of community and normalcy, too. Medin said volunteer efforts can provide assurance to local people they are not alone and are part of a larger community.

In the wake of Harvey, that is exactly what Lewis and Clark Middle School in Jefferson City is doing after “adopting” Goodson Middle School in Cypress, Texas, a northwestern suburb of Houston.

Lewis and Clark Principal Sherri Thomas said she has been in contact with Goodson’s principal, Sheri McCaig; it was McCaig’s similar first name and the schools’ similar size that got Thomas’ attention as she researched Houston-area schools after Harvey.

She said McCaig and other administrators there were having meetings with their district superintendent Friday to determine whether school would start again Tuesday or Sept. 11.

Whenever school does start again at Goodson, that’s when Lewis and Clark’s fundraising efforts will kick into full gear with activities like a “penny war,” school dance and an open call for monetary donations from the community, Thomas said.

Lewis and Clark’s efforts echo the fundraising efforts of Moreau Heights Elementary School students 12 years ago, when they presented a \$1,300 check to Jefferson City Helps.

Thomas said McCaig has told her Goodson's building did not sustain flood damage from Harvey, but the school was damaged by leaks in the roof after the storm dumped more than 2 feet of rain in that part of the county.

Lewis and Clark eventually will send Goodson a check with the money they raise, Thomas said.

At the time of the 2011 Joplin tornado, she said, "I gave stuff like everybody else" in response. However, like Medin and Winter's lessons learned from Waveland, she later heard from the Joplin district's superintendent that while their community was thankful for the outpouring of material support, they also requested time to breathe and to be asked what they need before having it delivered.

"Right now, it's compassion and kindness" instead of material goods, Thomas said of the nature of the relief her students, faculty and staff are providing to the Goodson community while they await the start of fundraising efforts.

Lewis and Clark faculty members are sending a handwritten letter of support to every member of Goodson's faculty. The same is happening between staff like cafeteria workers and secretaries, who also are ordering flowers for their Texan counterparts. Students are contributing letters, too.

"I think everybody should support everybody," and there's not enough of that sentiment in the country now, Lewis and Clark cafeteria worker Linda Hagerman said.

Thomas added eighth-grade teachers at Goodson have contacted their counterparts at Lewis and Clark to establish pen pal relationships between their students.

The Goodson community's future will be uncertain for a long time. While Thomas didn't want to risk misstating any numbers provided by McCaig, she said many homes of Goodson's students, faculty and staff have suffered major flood damage. Like Jefferson City, this is a community where more than half of the district's students are from families who were already economically disadvantaged.

The Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District that's home to Goodson is the third largest in Texas, with more than 115,000 students, meaning the district is also one of the largest in the country. That district is one of dozens in the Houston and southeastern Texas region whose families have experienced flood damage that's just as bad or worse.

Ten-year anniversary coverage after Hurricane Katrina reported Waveland's recovery was by no means complete, if it ever will be. However, Waveland's city government website shows even after the community was essentially erased off the face of the Earth 12 years ago, they too are now gathering relief for people affected by Harvey.

The website of Waveland's Ground Zero Hurricane Museum also shows that a plaque stands outside to recognize the help that assisted the community in its darkest hour: "Never has there been such a volunteer effort than was shown after Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005. We thank all who came to our aid and gave us hope and help after the devastation of the storm. May God Bless."