

# **On Working with Katrina Survivors: “I came away a Better Person”**

**By: Sherrie L. Wilson**

As a part of the Disaster Reserve Team for the Small Business Administration (SBA) I was assigned work in the State of Mississippi. Our Team was mainly made up of re-employed military and federal retirees. The SBA Disaster Assistance Program offers critical resources to communities devastated by natural disasters, such as flood, earthquakes, and hurricanes. I worked in the Disaster Recovery Centers in the cities of Biloxi, Bay Springs, Hattiesburg, Collins, Jackson, and Laurel from October 2005 through March 2006. The majority of my time was spent in the Laurel Center (4 months), a small rural town where just about everyone knew each other. Assignments were based on critical needs of the victims at any given point. I had an amazing post-Katrina experience:

- I witnessed the massive destruction, but still cannot adequately explain what I saw. Driving through the cities was tough for me. I felt like an intruder on people’s privacy and their sorrow. I learned that what could fascinate us as humans can also bring profound sadness.
- I witnessed the spirit of Hurricane Katrina survivors. Everyone I met felt blessed that he or she survived. Each person said he or she was even more blessed if his or her family was intact. Katrina survivors were grateful – even if, and especially if, the only thing that they had was each other. People cared for their neighbors, too. It was rare to meet a family that wasn’t caring for a non-relative. It was rare to meet anyone who wasn’t doing something to help someone else. I saw people rebuilding churches, taking meals to the needy, giving rides to those without transportation. Their gratitude toward the volunteers and service agencies was so enthusiastic and heartfelt that I felt embarrassed to be the recipient. They wore their belief in God proudly. And I was able to reaffirm lessons learned from my study through the Discipleship classes that – “God will make provisions despite opposition.”
- A third area of amazement was working with fellow volunteers. In the Laurel Disaster Recovery Center, where there was fluid staffing of up to 150 people from about 20-25 response agencies, there were no slackers. Everyone was there to work. Everyone willingly put in 12-14 hour days, menial working, and sleeping conditions, looked out for each other’s physical and mental health, and actively offered their help to each other. To know there are many people in our country with

such wonderful, giving spirit was humbling. I found that natural disasters bring people closer together.

Though I was compensated for my services, I felt a need as a member of the Christian faith to go above and beyond the call of duty to respond in many instances benevolently and compassionately to the need of those affected. I'm continuing to grow through God's amazing grace. Through all the Katrina rubble, there is a better tomorrow...a tomorrow that represent hope for a new beginning. I came away a better person.