

A KATRINA VOLUNTEER'S REPORT

By Mattie Sue Athan


The e-mail I received on September 9, 2005, asked for Hurricane Katrina rescue volunteers "... experienced with spiders and birds..." I was a viable candidate -- not tied to a time clock, within driving range, up-to-date vaccinations, a new van, and just a little extra money in my pocket. Because of horror stories I had heard, I carried no cash, only my debit card and one credit card. I spent about \$2,000 in two weeks, about \$500 provided by donations from friends and the rest on plastic. Since I couldn't leave until 9/11, and Katrina actually hit in the last days of August, I expected to be told they no longer needed help. I advised my pet sitter that I would be gone three days to three weeks.

Arriving on September 12 at Donna Powell's Baton Rouge home/emergency bird shelter, I found that the real work had only just begun. Volunteers were "organized" in this manner: when any person identified something that needed to be done, they tried to do that job. Staff at the "shelter" (a large one-story home with birds and supplies everywhere) cared for the birds already there -- mostly smaller companion birds left behind by evacuees -- and answered the phone which rang constantly in spite of massive problems with the phone systems. Out-of-area callers might have to dial dozens of times to get through. We took addresses from people who called, then went into New Orleans (gas for the round trip was about \$45 per van and we operated 2-3 vans daily) to break into homes and retrieve animals that were left behind. Dogs and cats were taken to Lamar-Dixon, Gonzalez shelter, birds were taken to Donna's, likewise, we took the fish, turtles, snakes, and other small pets to Donna's until we could find more appropriate housing.

I alternated days helping at the shelter and doing retrieval in the city during the ten days I was there. Almost every volunteer worked every waking minute, sometimes stopping to grab a bite of gumbo out of a

big pot on the stove. There were no sit-down dinners and only a few group meetings. Sure, there were a few miscommunications, but then, we weren't there to communicate; we were there to take care of the birds. When I arrived, there were probably fewer than 150 birds; when I left, probably twice that. I had the privilege of witnessing a few birds being returned (birds were returned in new cages with free accessories and food unless the owners preferred their old cage). One grateful owner, a nurse, was simply not allowed to leave her job to go home for her birds when the winds and waters rose.

Petco was wonderfully helpful, donating many needed supplies. The LSU Veterinary Staff, likewise, provided much support, and we found like-minded volunteers on the streets in t-shirts from Posado's, Best Friends, and HSUSLA. FEMA didn't get in our way. Military and local law enforcement were polite, friendly, helpful, and obviously appreciative that we were there to help them with the animals. I am proud to have served. Would I do it again? I hope I don't have to. I hope there here is never a need as great as the one I witnessed. It was a massive, unbelievable disaster in every sense of the word. ■



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(For show information contact Julie at alsn@cox.net)

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