

Tour of Duty



The Nurses of Eisenhower Medical Center Bring Hope and Healing to Survivors of Hurricane Katrina Deidre Braun, LAC, Acupuncturist, embraces a Waveland, Mississippi, resident and other images from the hurricane-ravaged Gulf. by Beverly Maxfield Katrina. Just the mention of her name conjures up heartbreaking images that will not soon be forgotten – lives forever changed by death, separation, property loss and displacement. As the nation responded, selflessly doing what it could and mobilizing to help virtual strangers in their time of need, so did the Eisenhower Medical Center family.

It was just two days after Labor Day when a team of eight Eisenhower Medical Center employees and two volunteer drivers blazed a trail to the Gulf Coast in hopes of bringing health, hope, support and comfort to the victims that they would empower to become survivors. The quick collaboration of Eisenhower's generous donors, executive leadership team and employees sent two rented recreational vehicles (RVs) to Mississippi to bring medical aid and support to victims of one of the nation's worst natural disasters.

Karen Stewart, RN, a native of Mississippi, helped lead the mission effort, an idea that emerged out of a weekly meeting with Louise White, Eisenhower Medical Center's Chief Nursing Officer, the Friday afternoon before Labor Day weekend.

"Mississippi is my home. I knew I needed to go and do something," Stewart says. "I had been in touch with the Mississippi Board of Nursing and was planning to leave when my work would allow. Louise White told me there would certainly be others that would want to go along as well."

White contacted Eisenhower's President and Chief Executive Officer, G. Aubrey Serfling, and numerous staff members, to get formal approvals and help lay the groundwork for the mission of mercy to Mississippi. She also spoke to several nurses who enthusiastically volunteered. Another miracle came though just in time – Serfling and Eisenhower Foundation President, Michael Landes, secured a generous \$10,000 donation from Jim and Jackie Lee Houston for the two RV rentals.



On Wednesday, September 7, the Eisenhower relief team departed on its 1,800-mile trip, traveling 26 hours toward a mission that would forever change their lives...and others.

On Sunday, they made their way to Waveland, Mississippi, the area of greatest need, and set up operations at Camp Katrina – a KmartSM parking lot that became a makeshift field hospital station. There they remained for 10 days, administering tetanus shots, making medical assessments and providing help wherever they could. Annette Lewis, RN, explains their feelings upon arriving at Waveland, an area that took the brunt of the storm. "Nothing could have prepared us for what we were going to see when we got there," Lewis says, hesitating a moment before continuing. "There were huge, heavy, metal billboards snapped like matchsticks and debris fields everywhere. As we were driving down to Waveland, I was preparing a little birthday celebration for Karen, so I missed some of the scenes on that drive down. When I stepped out of the RV, I looked around and thought it was like a bomb had gone off. Such a wide area of destruction...as far as the eye could see."

It was hard for any of them to imagine that this had once been a thriving town of neighborhoods, of bustling areas of commerce and activity.

"It was like a bomb had gone off inside of buildings," Susan Veldey, LVN, explains. "Things were just blown out." News reports estimated that monstrous waves up to 28 feet high came crashing through the town. There were signs of the devastation everywhere: trees obliterated by salt water and wind...water marks on buildings and homes.

"I still can't get my arms around that," says Stewart. "When you talk to people who actually swam in the surge, you just want to know: what does it look like? What does it sound like? What does it smell like?"

"A beautiful, very expensive boat had been washed up into a McDonald's parking lot," Lewis reports. "Someone had scribbled on the craft: 'sorry about your boat, but it saved five people's lives.'" This was only one of the constant reminders everywhere that people had fought to stay alive, of the many stories to be told, and of the heartrending struggles of which they would hear. "I keep thinking about the seniors, in their 70s and 80s, hanging onto rooftops for hours, so they wouldn't get carried away," Veldey says, shaking her head. "Nothing could have prepared us for what we were going to see when we got there." – Annette Lewis, RN

The team did not have a lot of time to dwell on the devastation. They would start their day with coffee and a cold shower at 6 or 6:30 a.m. – all 10 taking turns in the two RV showers. Breakfast was supplied daily by a church. By 7:30 a.m., the group was setting up supplies and ready to work.

Medical treatments included giving tetanus shots, hepatitis A vaccines, and general wound care. A mobile hospital was set-up at Camp Katrina to handle the more serious cases. But, the Eisenhower staff also offered so much more – assisting with debris removal and clean up in the area, instructing people how to limit exposure to toxins, dangerous molds and bacteria, directing people on where to find food, and lending a helping hand whenever and wherever it was needed, and always, a sympathetic ear.

"We really got to know some of the families...keeping a list of families that had mailing addresses and/or phone numbers, but lost everything else," Stewart says. "We served as contacts for these people, helping them to get supplies and stay in touch."

But just how many tetanus shots did they administer during their 10-day tour of duty?

Stewart smiles: "Well, we averaged about 400 a day; some days more, some days less, so a total of around 4,000."

"Yes, it definitely felt like a lot," Veldey replied with a laugh.

They will remember these days for a long time to come, and the survivors will not forget the help offered one by one – one to one.

Karen Stewart, RN; Susan Veldey, LVN; Annette Lewis, RN; Kay Flemming, RN; Polly D'Auria Showalter, RN; Katherine Collins, RN; Deidre Braun, LAC; Bill Mayton, RN; Bradley Collins and Nick White, drivers.

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