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## Four years later volunteers reflect on Katrina's wrath, migration up I-65

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Joe Boesen - Times Correspondent | Posted: Saturday, August 29, 2009 12:00 am | No Comments Posted

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PHOTO PROVIDED Teens from local high schools -- Andean, Crown Point, Lake Central and Merrillville -- help Faith Without Borders rebuild hurricane ravished New Orleans. The work was done on Poland Street in the Bywater neighborhood of the city in March 2008.



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Driving south toward the Gulf of Mexico in September 2005, Pastor Shawn Evans, of Valparaiso Nazarene Church, noticed nothing wrong in Mobile, Ala.

As he continued about 30 miles south, toward his destination of Bayou La Batre, Ala., Evans increasingly noticed things looked eerily askew.

"All the sudden you see a pasture and you see a shrimp boat just sitting there," he said.

On the morning of Aug. 29, Hurricane Katrina crashed into Louisiana and quickly headed inland, displacing about 200,000 families and causing massive destruction from the Texas Panhandle to Florida.

"People talk about hurricanes, and when they hit, they usually aren't as bad," Evans said, remembering a meeting with his congregation before Katrina hit.

"But this one was worse."

The congregation responded to the hurricane by sending 60 people and two semitrailers full of supplies to Bayou La Batre 12 days after Katrina hit.

"It looked like a bomb went off," Evans said.

"It was overwhelming but not hopeless."

Interstate 65 begins in Mobile and ends in Gary.

"Just before the hurricane hit, a couple of people started to arrive at our chapter," said Gordon Johnson, chief executive officer of American Red Cross of Northwest Indiana. "When the flood of people started coming in, we geared up for a major disaster relief operation right here in Merrillville for a disaster in Louisiana, Texas and Alabama."

Johnson and his staff soon found that families were driving north on I-65 until they ran out of food, gas and money.

"We partnered with churches and set up a feeding operation because when people arrived most hadn't eaten for 24 or 48 hours," he said.

In all, the local Red Cross assisted 791 families after Hurricane Katrina.

"Most people were looking for a safe place to land until they could sort out their lives," Johnson said.

As director of emergency services for the Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Gary, Sister Barbara Sable noticed that people fleeing the destruction exhibited two attitudes.

"It was horrible loss and frustration at that loss," she said. "And hope and gratitude that people from so far away would help them out."

Sable said Catholic Charities helped families find immediate living needs when they arrived in Northwest Indiana and also helped them decide whether they would be staying here or returning to New Orleans.

Helen Rutkowski led 180 people in seven groups to the 9th Ward of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. With St. John the Evangelist Church in St. John, she led the first trip on the one-year anniversary of the hurricane.

"I remember sitting and looking at abandoned neighborhoods with no birds, no life," she said. "I wondered 'How can this be America?'"

Repeat trips to New Orleans caused the group to fall in love with the city and its people, Rutkowski said.

"We would reflect in the evening and say 'I don't think I would have that much hope or faith,'" she said. "To have that sense of community and want to rebuild and return home. We became inspired by the homeowners."

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