

@ Health & Well-Being ISSUE

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FOCUS: KATRINA/RITA RESPONSE FUND

Hurricane Katrina storm clouds roll over the south Louisiana landscape.

KATRINA/RITA

An American Tragedy Hits Home For Central Louisiana

Hurricane Katrina cut a path of death and destruction along the Gulf Coast and into Louisiana at the end of August 2005. Demolishing structures and also breaking the hearts of people across Louisiana, our country and around the world.

But in the midst of this tragedy, the strength and generosity that has always been part of Louisiana's culture continued to burn bright, as neighbors, friends and strangers came together to help the thousands of evacuees who lost their homes, their belongings - even members of their families.

(continued on page 2)

Foundation Quickly Responds

American Tragedy

(continued from page 1)

And within days The Rapides Foundation joined that effort and began looking for ways to help the evacuees who fled to Central Louisiana to escape Katrina's fury.

In the days following the fallout from the disaster, The Rapides Foundation quickly sprung into action, suspending its grantmaking policy in order to make an unprecedented \$1 million donation to the Central Louisiana United Way's *Central Louisiana Katrina/Rita Response Fund* and pledging up to \$500,000 for nine school districts in the Cenla area to help defray the costs schools incurred for evacuated students.

"We made the donation pretty quickly," Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation, said. "As a Foundation, we were afraid that if we waited 30 days, while half the evacuees would possibly have gone home or moved on, whatever was needed may not have been done. We would not have been able to go back and undo the evacuees' suffering during that time had we not acted swiftly."

Known for its philanthropic efforts, The Rapides Foundation is one of the largest endowed charitable foundations in Louisiana and has been in existence since September 1994. It provides funding for programs that are working to improve community health.

Through its grants, The Rapides Foundation seeks to bring about broad-based improvements in the health of the community, Rosier explained. In order to do that, the Foundation works in areas that try to address the issues that drive, impact or improve health. To change health, be it changing systems or changing behaviors is very long-term work. Rosier believes the Foundation is uniquely equipped to have discipline over a long period of time to accomplish these goals and this is the "highest and best place" for its efforts. Over time, he said the Foundation has developed the work they do, but then along came Hurricane Katrina.

"With Katrina, we were all convinced this was an extraordinary, once-in-a-Century, once-a-millennium event – it was the 'Big One,'" Rosier said.

Katrina's rampage through the Deep South's center of culture and commerce did more than wreck buildings, businesses and lives. It reminded all that a healthy community requires some basic elements to enable and support quality of life, no matter the setting. The Foundation believes that communities must work together to support health and well-being for families and neighbors.

Suspending its grantmaking policies in order to help achieve this goal and to help the thousands of displaced evacuees in Central Louisiana was the "right thing to do" as Rosier explains, but moreover, the organizations that have worked so hard to take care of them also needed help. These organizations, large and small, are what brought the Foundation back to its roots in looking at long-term change or the long-term effects of Katrina while still going out on a limb to help a community, a state, in need.

One of the Foundation's primary concerns was that the impact on this region was cumulatively not only going to impact all the individual lives of evacuees, but it was also going to impact this area's entire nonprofit service

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*Joe Rosier, President and CEO,
The Rapides Foundation*

Foundation Quickly Responds

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infrastructure – possibly to the point that it would be unable to respond to future disasters. “After these organizations responded to Katrina,” Rosier said, “the Foundation believed this infrastructure would be crippled for generations to come because they would have pulled out all their resources to help evacuees and it would have been very difficult to replenish that.”

Rosier further explained that this endeavor was definitely an “about-face” for the Foundation and was extremely different from the status quo.

Since the Foundation deals with long-term change, Rosier said both he and the Board realized right away that this was different and critical and was “something we don’t think will happen again for the rest of our careers here.” All members of the Foundation felt, initially, that disaster funding as a response to Katrina was a worthy consideration. Board members weighed the decision knowing ahead of time that this funding is risky. “But we believed then and we believe now that the risk was definitely worth it,” Rosier said.

In the first two weeks following the storm, Rosier believes it was all about water and food

and a roof over evacuees’ heads and the Foundation decided to address this. The Foundation’s Board members realized that people waded out of water, were put on a bus, dropped off on a doorstep in the Central Louisiana community and they may have had only a bottle of water in their hands. Katrina evacuees certainly needed much more.

“In order to meet these needs, we had to take the risk,” said Regionald Seastrunk, Board Chairman for The Rapides Foundation. “We assessed that and said the risk of taking action far outweighed those of not doing anything. We were willing to make this investment knowing it was not 100 percent grantmaking and that it was about a need that was right here, right now. We believed this situation could have bankrupted the resources of the nonprofits that were going to be called upon.”

Seastrunk believes the donation to the Katrina fund not only allowed the Foundation to help evacuees, but also enabled all the entities that responded to hopefully be whole after doing so.

In the early days right after the storm, churches and other organizations just threw open their

(continued on page 4)



The Lakeview neighborhood of New Orleans 2 months after Hurricane Katrina. This house is on West End Blvd., just blocks from the 300 ft. levee breach on the 17th Street Canal. The area was flooded with over 12 ft. of water and sat submerged for weeks. They are not projected to have electricity until March or later.

The Foundation’s Board members realized that people waded out of water, were put on a bus, dropped off on a doorstep in the Central Louisiana community and they may have had only a bottle of water in their hands. Katrina evacuees certainly needed much more.

Foundation Quickly Responds



(left) Flooding in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The flood water in this Metairie neighborhood was just over five feet.

American Tragedy

(continued from page 3)

doors and weren't thinking about 24/7 air conditioning and the whopping utility bill they'd be getting in 45 days or that their checking account might not even cover it." For me and the rest of our Board, we had to really get comfortable with the fact that we wouldn't be setting a precedent that we now fund social services," Seastrunk said. "We just said this is so big and so different that we are compelled to do it and it is absolutely the right thing to do. Now, we are ready to get back to our normal work and not lose our focus – to improve community health in Central Louisiana."

As to how the idea for the donation came about, Rosier explained that it came from within the Foundation. He then touched base with the Foundation's Chairman of the Board, to discuss going to work on a special fund. Rosier said a special Board meeting was called, which is rare and illustrates the extraordinary nature of this effort.

"As a Foundation, we realized help was needed immediately after this disaster. We abandoned our grant cycle, our deadlines and called our Board because they, too, realized the significance of this and all agreed – 'let's do it,'" Rosier said.

After Hurricane Rita hit the Cenla area, the United Way renamed the fund the *Central Louisiana Katrina/Rita Response Fund* and money became available to those organizations that helped evacuees from both storms. To date, The Rapides Foundation's donation to

the United Way's Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Fund has helped more than 86 organizations recoup costs and provide for evacuees still staying within the confines of their shelters with a myriad of needs. As for the Foundation's education funding, close to \$500,000 has been paid out to schools that enrolled over 5,000 children in Central Louisiana communities.

Rosier says the Foundation is very proud to have been able to help Cenla and the evacuees from both storms. Additionally, he feels the public-at-large also believes the Foundation really "got it right." Rosier has heard nothing but positive comments about both the Foundation's contributions. "As a matter of fact," he stated, "this has been pretty widely credited to us as a good thing throughout philanthropy and the nonprofit world that we did this and it was fairly immediate."

Rosier wants to be clear in pointing out that the Foundation did not make the donation for any kind of recognition but because it "was quite simply the right thing – the only thing – to do under the circumstances.

"What compelled us to give was the impact this would have on the ability of our community's organizations to respond and continue with their missions once the crisis was over," he said. "We know they would have figured something out. But because we could help, we did."

Central Louisiana Katrina/Rita Response Fund



The damage from Hurricane Katrina was catastrophic in southeastern Louisiana and southern Mississippi.

United Effort

United Way of Central Louisiana

With tears in his eyes and a crack in his voice, David Britt clears his throat in an attempt to speak again about the tremendous pride he has in the Central Louisiana community for their overwhelming support of Hurricane Katrina/Rita victims, and their unending generosity in helping evacuees in a myriad of ways, including donating to the United Way's *Central Louisiana Katrina/Rita Response Fund*.

"I worry that I will never say 'thank you' enough to all the people who have helped evacuees get back on their feet after such a large-scale disaster," Britt, President and CEO of the United Way of Central Louisiana, said. "I could never have imagined all the things Central Louisiana residents have done to assist evacuees. It simply amazes and humbles me."

One of the single, largest donations to the United Way's response fund came from The Rapides Foundation in the form of an

unprecedented contribution. The Rapides Foundation's Board of Trustees suspended its grantmaking policy to donate \$1 million to the United Way's response fund. Beyond the Foundation's donation, the fund has received an additional \$180,000 in donations. All money donated to the United Way's fund stays here in Central Louisiana to assist organizations that responded to evacuees.

Initially, Britt believed the Gulf Coast area had dodged the bullet and that things weren't as bad as feared. However, when he awoke the Tuesday morning after the storm hit on Monday, August 29, he found things to be worse. "Tuesday, about 10:00 a.m., it hit me that this was going to have a huge impact on the Central Louisiana area," he said. "We were all scrambling to figure out what to do."

Wednesday morning following the storm, the United Way's Board happened to have a regularly-scheduled meeting. On his way to the meeting,

(continued on page 6)

Central Louisiana Katrina/Rita Response Fund

United Effort

(continued from page 5)

Britt met Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation in the elevator and they began discussing the impact the storm was going to have on this area.

Rosier had already discussed going to work on a special fund with the Foundation Board. He and Britt continued this conversation with regard to the need to do something immediately to respond. "It made sense to me," Britt said, "to set up a special fund for people to contribute – one that they knew was targeted for the victims and that all funds would stay in Central Louisiana."

As with The Rapides Foundation, getting this involved in disaster response is not typically how the United Way operates. Britt explained the United Way does not set up disaster mechanisms because that is normally the function of the Red Cross and the Salvation Army; the United Way of Central Louisiana is the largest single local funder of each organization. Part of the reason the United Way funds these organizations is so they can respond to crisis and disaster, therefore, the United Way is not normally compelled to jump in and reinvent the wheel.

"This disaster was so huge, however," Britt said, "that it was qualitatively different. Funds given

to the Red Cross and the Salvation Army go to a centralized location and that's fine; but we (Cenla United Way) knew there would be a lot of local demands that would be outside the Red Cross and the Salvation Army's means and someone would need to quickly respond."

That is exactly what Rosier and Britt discussed in the elevator that morning. Rosier expressed the Foundation's desire to respond, but not become the mechanism that monitored funding. Britt said the discussion quickly led to the realization that setting up a response fund would be mutually beneficial.

After the United Way's board meeting Wednesday, the executive committee was empowered to study the situation and take necessary steps. Britt said the next morning; the fund was opened and announced. The Rapides Foundation assisted in announcing the fund and getting the word out to those who wished to donate and also to organizations that they could apply for assistance.

"Funds just started rolling in," Britt said. "Over \$100,000 above and beyond The Rapides Foundation's \$1 million donation was sent in without even trying. People wanted to help."

Overseeing the dissemination of funds is a panel of community leaders comprised of some of Central Louisiana's brightest businessmen and women. "These are intelligent folks who know

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A completely submerged car lies in the flooded waters of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Water marks show the water reached over five feet.

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David Britt, President and CEO of the United Way of Central Louisiana

Central Louisiana Katrina/Rita Response Fund

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the value of a dollar, but are also compassionate and can respond to needs. They have common sense mixed with compassion and a concern for accountability," Britt said.

One of those bright and compassionate community leaders on the panel is The Rapides Foundation's Vice President of Programs, Allen Smart. Smart believes the United Way of Central Louisiana did a fantastic job of putting together procedures and protocols for the fund's granting process. Assembling an application form and the allocation panel so quickly helped the funds begin to trickle into the community that much faster.

"We've been meeting sometimes twice a week and one thing that we, as a Foundation, impressed upon the United Way was that we wanted low bureaucracy as well as quick turn-around because we wanted to make these funds available in a really efficient way," Smart said. "We knew that churches, community groups and other organizations were putting out money that they didn't really have. They needed the dollars replenished immediately – they don't have deep pockets."

Smart and Britt explained that the panel focuses not so much on the future, but has responded so far on a reimbursement basis to agencies and organizations that have put money out-of-pocket to provide for immediate needs of evacuees such as shelter, food, transportation, clothing and more. The fund is targeted mainly at supporting churches, nonprofit groups and in some cases a town or village or any organized group that put money out-of-pocket to support evacuees when they really had no resources, or limited resources, to do so.

Being a part of a panel that disseminated funds rapidly is a form of business that is definitely different for Smart, who usually focuses on long-term results at the Foundation. "This is very, very different for me," Smart said, "but extremely rewarding. On the panel, we deal with immediate decisions compared to the weeks and months

"The Foundation really applauds the United Way as a tremendous partner. We think they have helped to play a unique role for the community in providing leadership on the Katrina/Rita relief efforts."

*Allen Smart, Vice President of Programs,
The Rapides Foundation*

of analysis, assessments and thinking 'big picture' that we do at the Foundation. Although it is different, it is certainly the appropriate response."

As proud as Britt is of the community and The Rapides Foundation for their generous contributions to the Katrina/Rita Response Fund is Smart of the United Way of Central Louisiana. "The Foundation really applauds the United Way as a tremendous partner," Smart said. "We think they have helped to play a unique role for the community in providing leadership on the Katrina/Rita relief efforts. There was no other agency that could have or would have done this and done such a fantastic job."

Smart points out that the United Way is not a direct service agency, but that they quickly became one and he, along with the entire Foundation, was very happy to see them step up and involve themselves in a really positive way.

Thus far, approximately \$651,000 has been disseminated from the response fund to various Central Louisiana organizations. (See list on page 9)

"Early on, we were reimbursing churches basically just trying to help them stay open and

(continued on page 8)

Central Louisiana Katrina/Rita Response Fund

United Effort

(continued from page 7)

keep treating evacuees," Britt said. "There wasn't much in the way of invoices, initially, but that quickly changed as bills came in and churches were able to provide paperwork. I am very proud of the way the two organizations and the panel saw the need to respond quickly but carefully. We all knew this situation was different and we had to respond immediately because there were people literally arriving in town with the clothes they had on their backs. Because they swam out of the storm, their clothes were dirty and toxic. We couldn't have waited weeks or months to respond."

Britt said that although the community responded with generosity to the fund, many needs would have gone unmet had it not been for The Rapides Foundation's donation. The main thing Britt believes the Foundation's donation made possible was to get resources to people quickly and support those on the frontline who were working with evacuees directly every day. He further believes the fund has encouraged organizations to continue assisting evacuees because they know there is a good chance of recouping some of the funds.

"I think that without the money from The Rapides Foundation, there would be an awful lot of churches sitting in the dark right now because their utility bills were huge," Britt said. "We've already put out more than half-a-million dollars to various organizations and without the Foundation's donation; we never would have had the funds to help all these people. It was such a generous gift and it created a lot of hope."

Helping these small or large churches and organizations that have helped those in need is something both Britt and Smart agree is extremely rewarding and they are glad to have been able to play a part in something much bigger than themselves.

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David Britt, President and CEO of the United Way of Central Louisiana

"I have been constantly impressed with the level of commitment of the church communities and the smallest congregations who maybe didn't have the financial ability to help, but who opened their doors anyway and cooked for evacuees, built showers for them, and were there 24 hours-a-day to help these folks," Smart said. "This once-in-a-millennium crisis just clicked with them and they were called to help and they did. I never would have thought this could be true. It is amazing and very impressive."

Britt acknowledges that there will be many heartfelt, touching and emotional stories that the public may never know about and all the efforts to help evacuees, but he knows that he will forever feel blessed to have had the chance to be a part of this humanitarian effort that cuts to the core of what organizations like the United Way and The Rapides Foundation stand for – helping people.

Donations as of February 2, 2006: Amount Awarded: Parish:

Bread of Life Christian Church	5,500	Allen
Christ Praise and Worship Center	1,350	Allen
First Baptist Church	7,500	Allen
First United Pentecostal Church	2,500	Allen
Mount Hope Baptist Church	4,000	Allen
Solid Rock Church of God	500	Allen
South Central Allen Community Food Pantry	2,182	Allen
St. Peter Baptist Church	1,300	Allen
Trinity Baptist Church	7,000	Allen
Avoyelles Resurrection Ministries	2,200	Avoyelles
New Life Assembly of God	4,593	Avoyelles
Prayer Power	1,000	Avoyelles
Silent Love Ministries	1,500	Avoyelles
St. Anthony Catholic Church	500	Avoyelles
St. Anthony of Padua	250	Avoyelles
Grace Baptist Church	1,053	Catahoula
Christ Way Church	1,500	Grant
Jena Kiwanis Club	10,000	LaSalle
Nolley Memorial	1,000	LaSalle
Standard Baptist Church	3,120	LaSalle
Town of Olla	1,500	LaSalle
Town of Olla Volunteer Fire Dept.	1,042	LaSalle
Volunteers of America	7,500	LaSalle
Apostolic Center	1,250	Natchitoches
Aftercare Ministries	20,950	Rapides
Alexandria Metropolitan Foundation	53,220	Rapides
American Red Cross	115,400	Rapides
Boys and Girls Club	6,000	Rapides
Cenla Area Agency on Aging	350	Rapides
Christian Love Shelter	5,000	Rapides
Christian Worship Center	19,278	Rapides
Comforter Baptist Church	500	Rapides
Community Healthworx	3,175	Rapides
Emmanuel Baptist Church	5,500	Rapides
Family Counseling Agency	27,656	Rapides
First Baptist Church of Lecompte	1,500	Rapides
First St. Mark Baptist Church	1,000	Rapides
First Union Baptist Church	1,000	Rapides
Greater St. Lawrence Baptist Church	500	Rapides
Horseshoe Baptist Church	4,771	Rapides
Live Oak Community Church	2,000	Rapides
Louisiana District Assemblies of God	16,247	Rapides
Louisiana District of the United Pentecostal Church	17,096	Rapides
My Fathers House	1,200	Rapides
New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church	500	Rapides
New Scott Oilly Baptist Church	5,750	Rapides
Parkview Baptist Church	3,092	Rapides
Rapides Minority Community Development	15,000	Rapides
Rapides Parish Library	3,220	Rapides
Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church	2,000	Rapides
Salvation Army	41,500	Rapides
Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation	250	Rapides
St. Francis & Anne Catholic Church	400	Rapides
St. Francis Xavier Cathedral	2,000	Rapides
St. Martin Catholic Church	1,350	Rapides
St. Mary's Residential Training School	10,000	Rapides
St. Michael's Episcopal Church	2,000	Rapides
The Extra Mile	11,574	Rapides
The Orchard Foundation	19,500	Rapides
The Shepherd Center	103,718	Rapides
True Vine Missionary Baptist Church	4,200	Rapides
United Seek & Save Foundation	1,200	Rapides
United Way of Central Louisiana	8,371	Rapides
Volunteers Of America	1,000	Rapides
Wesley Ministries	2,500	Rapides
Woodmen of the World	10,700	Rapides
YMCA	10,940	Rapides
YWCA	3,322	Rapides
East Leesville Baptist Church	9,000	Vernon
First Baptist Church of Leesville	2,000	Vernon
Louisiana Lions Camp	2,250	Vernon
Vernon Community Action Council	1,500	Vernon
Totals:	\$651,020	

The background satellite view shows the immense size and intensity of Hurricane Katrina only hours before making landfall.

First Baptist Church - Oakdale



Stephen Laughlin (left), Pastor of First Baptist Church in Oakdale looks over food supplies with Hurricane Katrina evacuee Brian Etienne, Sr.

Oakdale

Home away from home

As a minister for 19 years, Stephen Laughlin feels what he experienced helping evacuees in the midst of Hurricane Katrina's devastation compares to none in all his years in the ministry.

"On a pure ministry level," Laughlin, pastor of First Baptist Church in Oakdale, said, "In all my years as a pastor, I cannot think of anything that is more of a Christ-based ministry than what we did for our evacuees."

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First Baptist Church - Oakdale

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Laughlin and his congregation housed and cared for as many as 76 evacuees from Belle Chasse and St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes for a period of approximately six to eight weeks following the storm. He said they started arriving at the church the Tuesday after the storm hit on Monday, August 29.

Last year, during the fallout from Hurricane Ivan, Laughlin's church housed approximately 40 people for two nights. He and members of the congregation fed and took care of them although they "really had no idea what they were doing."

This time around, however, Laughlin believes they were much better prepared and equipped to handle evacuees. He said they began to prepare as soon as they believed the storm was actually going to take place and it was going to

be serious. "We began making plans to house as many as we could. We were ready for them."

Although ready, Laughlin said the church was still on its own in the beginning. Because the church was not an official Red Cross or Salvation Army shelter, they weren't receiving much assistance until the United Way stepped in and saved the day in a big way.

"It has helped us purchase food, with staffing of overtime, and pay for utilities above and beyond our normal use," he said. "The building where evacuees were staying is one in which we usually only turn the air-conditioner on two days a week – Sundays and Wednesdays – while the evacuees were here it ran 24 hours-a-day for nearly six weeks straight. This made it a little more expensive but the grant helped tremendously."

(continued on page 12)



Hurricane Katrina evacuees from Pointe a la Hache, LA (left-right) Tori Etienne, Lynette Roberson, and Paulette Moliere share cooking duties at First Baptist Church in Oakdale.

Out of a disaster have come ties that bind for this church in Oakdale, its members and the evacuees they housed.

First Baptist Church - Oakdale

(continued from page 11)

Each family staying at the church had their own space in a Sunday school room with privacy. An outhouse and shower building were set up outside with a propane heater, electricity and water for showers and such.

Laughlin said all 76 of the evacuees who stayed at the church were related and actually traveled together to flee the storm. They showed up at the Oakdale church and knew it was the place for them. "They felt deeply blessed to be here and I assure you, we were blessed as well just by being able to get to know them," he said.

Brian Etienne, one of the evacuees who stayed at the church, believes the experience he and his family had there was a unique one. "After stopping at a couple of hotels, we discovered that there was nowhere for us to go," Etienne said, "and we then found out about the church in Oakdale. We have been so very blessed, believe me. We lost everything in the storm, but we feel we haven't lost anything because of the way they took care of us here."

Laughlin said these evacuees are hard-working, homeowners with full-time jobs – good, solid people who needed a little help in the way of shelter. Although many members of the church helped prepare food for them and cared for them in many ways, Laughlin said for the most part, the evacuees took care of themselves, cleaned up after themselves, cleaned the kitchen, bathroom facilities, and more. They wanted to take care of themselves, he pointed out.

When it came time to assist with evacuees from Hurricane Rita, Laughlin called his former church in Minden to see if they could house his church's Katrina evacuees. So, the 76 packed up and made their way to Minden in order for the Oakdale church to assist even more people during the night of the storm. As soon as it was safe, the Katrina group headed "back home" to Oakdale.

Even after the evacuees left, some have come back to the church to visit. "We were so glad to see them," Laughlin said. "They stayed in their old Sunday school room."

Out of disaster have come ties that bind for this church in Oakdale, its members and the evacuees they housed. Not only did they give them shelter and food, they took a large group of them to the high school football game on Friday evenings no matter whether local or out of town.

"Our children have gotten to be good friends with theirs; they go to school together now," Laughlin said. "These folks live in Oakdale. We know these people on a first-name basis; they're our friends and we are committed to them. As long as they need us, we will be here."

Etienne agrees the bond that has formed is indeed a special one. "If we ever had to do this all over again – which hopefully we won't – these wonderful people would be the first ones I'd call," he said. "We won't forget these people, ever. They will always be in our prayers."

“ There was nowhere for us to go ... we have been so very blessed, believe me. We lost everything in the storm, but we feel we haven't lost anything because of the way they took care of us here.”

Brian Etienne, one of the evacuees who stayed at the Oakdale First Baptist Church

Bonding Ministry

East Leesville Baptist Church



East Leesville Baptist Church evacuees (left-right) Marvin Gordon, Stephone Powell and Michael Meyer

At East Leesville Baptist Church, Office Manager and Shelter Coordinator Mary Johnson has catered to the needs of church members and those in need for 21 years. As an official Red Cross shelter, Johnson has seen storms – and evacuees – come and go over the years. But she has never seen, or been a part of, anything like the fallout from Hurricane Katrina.

“What this experience has done is bring me to a different level of ministry,” Johnson said. “I have worked with many people over the years, but this disaster really made me think of Jesus and how he ministered to people.”

She points out some of the evacuees were the poorest of people and some of them were not as poor, but they were all in the same boat – they’d lost their homes and what they could pack in their vehicles was all they had.

Fifty-three year-old Gaynell Stafford of New Orleans packed up her vehicle, a few belongings and her family and feels the shelter was a lifesaver for them. As they evacuated the night before Katrina hit, they had no idea where they were headed. When they got to Leesville they saw a Red Cross truck in front of the church and decided to stop.

(continued on page 14)

East Leesville Baptist Church

“I felt every bit of what these people were feeling. There was a lot of hurt and a lot of pain and I discussed this with them. I formed friendships with them, I cried with them ... we bonded. I hope God lets this experience stay with me for a long, long time.”

Mary Johnson, Office Manager and Shelter Coordinator, East Leesville Baptist Church

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“We pulled in and it was the best move we could have ever made,” Stafford said. “It was a true blessing to be there and Ms. Mary is an angel. There wasn’t a problem we brought to her that she didn’t help us solve. If it hadn’t been for her and this church, Lord have mercy, we would have been living on the street like a bunch of animals.”

Johnson said she got to know many of the 150 evacuees personally and that real ministry begins when you help total strangers such as

these, in need of food, water and shelter.

“I felt every bit of what these people were feeling,” she said. “There was a lot of hurt and a lot of pain and I discussed this with them. I formed friendships with them, I cried with them ... we bonded. I hope God lets this experience stay with me for a long, long time.”

Johnson said the church was ready to house Katrina evacuees by September 5 and began receiving them on September 6. When Rita hit, they were maxed out, but she refused to allow

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New Orleans resident Emelda Kenney was reunited with her daughter at the shelter and neither are planning on returning to the city.

East Leesville Baptist Church

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anyone to sleep in their vehicles outside and turned no one away.

After Katrina, evacuees came to the church from many communities in the New Orleans area; the Ninth Ward, West Bank, East Bank and Slidell. They came to the church in family units of 15, 20 or more, together in one group. Johnson said the church provided cots, bedding and everything the families needed, but was shocked when all family members wanted their cots next to one another.

"They slept in families," she said. "I guess because of what they'd been through, they didn't want to be apart from anyone in their family for any length of time. They stayed in very, very tight family units the entire time they were here. They all became very close with everyone else in the shelter, as well."

As soon as members of the community discovered how many evacuees were at the church, food began pouring in and many volunteers stepped forward to help. But there were still many things the church needed to properly care for so many people.

"When the grant money from the United Way came in, it really helped with a lot of things. Even though we had canned goods and paper goods, we needed necessities like eggs, cheese, lunchmeat and our electric bill was huge. It's amazing how help arrives when you need it most."



New Orleans resident Patricia Ann Powell said, "All things I lost are just material; but you cannot replace lives - mine or my loved ones. I am truly blessed."

Thanks to the United Way's *Central Louisiana Katrina/Rita Response Fund*, the Leesville church received a \$9,000 grant to assist in taking care of evacuees. Johnson said the money came in no time, within one week, and although the community helped out a lot, the grant money was a Godsend because "when you feed this many people and have toiletry needs, it gets very, very expensive."

Johnson said during the first week she and other members of the church were there nearly 24 hours-a-day providing assistance or cooking breakfast as early as 4:30 every morning. By the second week, they began getting worn out and were pleased to discover many of the women in the group wanted to cook, clean and do things not only for themselves, but to help out and provide church members some relief.

New Orleans resident Krystal Powell remembers the time a Red Cross worker came to inspect the shelter. Powell explains that the shelter was in immaculate condition and the worker was amazed.

"He told us this was the cleanest shelter he'd been to in awhile," Krystal said. "He was impressed we kept the shelter nice and surprised to discover that it was all of us (evacuees) who were cleaning. At first, church members did the cooking and cleaning, but we knew they would get tired and so we pulled together and kept the place up."

(continued on page 16)



New Orleans resident Krystal Powell teamed with fellow evacuees to take over cooking and cleaning duties at the East Leesville Baptist Church shelter.

East Leesville Baptist Church

(continued from page 15)

Patricia Ann Powell, Krystal's mother, feels living in a shelter was difficult at first, but having her family around helped.

"At first, living in the shelter was hard and an experience I never thought I'd go through," Patricia said. "But everyone was so kind and helpful. I look at this in two ways: I lost some things, but I gained a lot. I was blessed to be there. I have my strength and my health and can start over again. All things I lost are just material; but you cannot replace lives – mine or my loved ones. I am truly blessed."

Many of the evacuees who stayed in the church weren't planning on going back to New Orleans to live, but were going to settle in Leesville.

"We have been back to see what it is like down there," Patricia said, "it looks like a war zone. No, no, no way are we going back."

Emelda Kenney, who didn't immediately evacuate New Orleans, and her daughter Constance Gordon were reunited at the shelter after being separated for two weeks. Neither is planning to return to New Orleans.

"I am going to be wherever my daughter and son-in-law are," Kenney said. "I am not going to be hard-headed; next time I will listen. I made my decision when I was trying to get out of there that I wasn't going back; I just didn't know where my new life would start. But wherever they're at, that's where I'll be. They're all I have."

Johnson said evacuees stayed in the church through October 28 and that she is now going to take some time to write about the experience in a journal. "These people will be my friends forever and I am going to write all of this down so when I am old, I can read it again and remember the experience."



New Orleans resident Constance Gordon was reunited with her mother at East Leesville Baptist Church after being separated for two weeks following Hurricane Katrina.

So many families lost everything due to the hurricanes.

The Shepherd Center

Against All Odds

The Shepherd Center

100 ft. from the 17th Street canal breach in New Orleans, water was still leaking through the levee, 3 months after Hurricane Katrina.

Jannease Seastrunk watched in horror from her hospital bed in Baton Rouge as evacuee babies from New Orleans were brought to the hospital where she was a patient.

Seastrunk, executive director of The Shepherd Center in Alexandria, had just given birth to her son. He arrived early and was receiving special care at the hospital in the days leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina.

"I watched everything unfold and saw all these babies being brought into the hospital without their mothers," Seastrunk said. "It was just awful. Traveling back to Alexandria, this weighed heavily on my mind and I knew that we, at The Shepherd Center, were going to have to do something to help all these evacuees. I knew we'd have many in our area and they would most definitely need our help."

Seastrunk was right. As thousands of evacuees flocked to the Central Louisiana area before, during and after Hurricane Katrina, they needed food, shelter and clothing. The Shepherd Center tended to the lost or displaced evacuees and despite all odds, kept efforts rolling even when there was no money to do so.

The Shepherd Center was created in 1983 and has, for the past 23 years, provided emergency assistance to anyone in need. Seastrunk began preparing to meet the needs of evacuees in the Cenla area even before she left the hospital in Baton Rouge.

She explained that the shelter's supplies are relatively short at the end of the year. Her thoughts were on how the center would meet the needs of all the evacuees and make ends meet when she heard of The Rapides Foundation's donation

(continued on page 18)

The Shepherd Center

Against All Odds

(continued from page 17)

to the United Way's *Central Louisiana Katrina/Rita Response Fund* on the radio driving home. Hearing that, she breathed a sigh of relief and knew instantly that the center would be able to keep relief efforts going.

"I knew early on that we would respond, and run out of supplies and personal items within the first few days after we started to assist evacuees," she said. "We had faith we'd find money somehow, so we bought what we needed and kept going. We applied for, and received funds from the United Way – we were able to continue assisting evacuees. What a blessing these funds were."

Taking in 200 calls per day under normal conditions, the center began to receive between 600-800 calls each day and seeing approximately 400-500 people daily after the disaster. Seastrunk said it was overwhelming and she worried that the center might not be able to help them all.

"People were lined up for hours outside our building and it was really amazing because they were calm and relaxed in the midst of losing all they'd owned," she said. "It was an incredible experience for those of us at the shelter because we were always worried if we'd truly be able to meet their needs. But they were just so gracious and thankful for whatever they received."

Seastrunk said she and her employees at the center heard many of the evacuees' stories and experiences that have forever changed their lives, and being able to meet the evacuees' needs proved that the center had lived up to its name.

"We didn't see any of the evacuees giving up, they just kept going," she said, "and they weren't going to let this get the best of them. It also brought out the best in our staff and our volunteers."

Speaking of volunteers, Seastrunk is very thankful and appreciative to all who volunteered their precious time to come down to the center and help out. With so many people in need and such an influx of requests, the center couldn't have made it through without their help.

Volunteers and volunteer donations are the mainstay of the center. It is primarily funded by 69 local churches that donate their ministry funds to the center, two large annual fund-raisers and by the Friends of the Shepherd Center, which is comprised of community members who donate funds to help the center accomplish its mission.

It still wasn't enough to sustain the overwhelming need this time around. Seastrunk said the center has received three grants from the United Way's response fund that were used to help over 2,000 evacuees. Initially, she explained, the first grant of \$6,000 helped

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"I honestly don't know what we would have done without the funds from the United Way and The Rapides Foundation . . . I know the community would have helped, but this money was such a huge relief, especially because we didn't have to jump through a lot of hoops to get it. This has been one of the easiest funding experiences I have ever had and in a time of crisis, what a relief to ask for what we needed and to have gotten it. It was a wonderful experience. One I'll never forget."

*Jannease Seastrunk,
Executive Director, The Shepherd Center*

The Shepherd Center

A young Hurricane Katrina survivor clings to a bottle of water as the clean up and repair continues in her neighborhood.



232 households with gas vouchers and transportation needs. That money was gone in a matter of five to seven days.

"Then Rita hit and we had another influx of people needing food and we'd run out the very next day after the storm," she said. "We had to go buy more to help and we applied and received another \$10,000 just for food. We went through that quickly, also."

As the shelter began to fall behind we received the third grant of \$53,000. All in all, the grants helped with temporary hires to handle the paperwork overload, food, hygiene items, providing transportation in the way of gasoline

or airline tickets/bus tickets for those who found jobs elsewhere and for utility deposits for evacuees who found housing.

"I honestly don't know what we would have done without the funds from the United Way and The Rapides Foundation," she said. "I know the community would have helped, but this money was such a huge relief, especially because we didn't have to jump through a lot of hoops to get it. This has been one of the easiest funding experiences I have ever had and in a time of crisis, what a relief to ask for what we needed and to have gotten it. It was a wonderful experience. One I'll never forget."

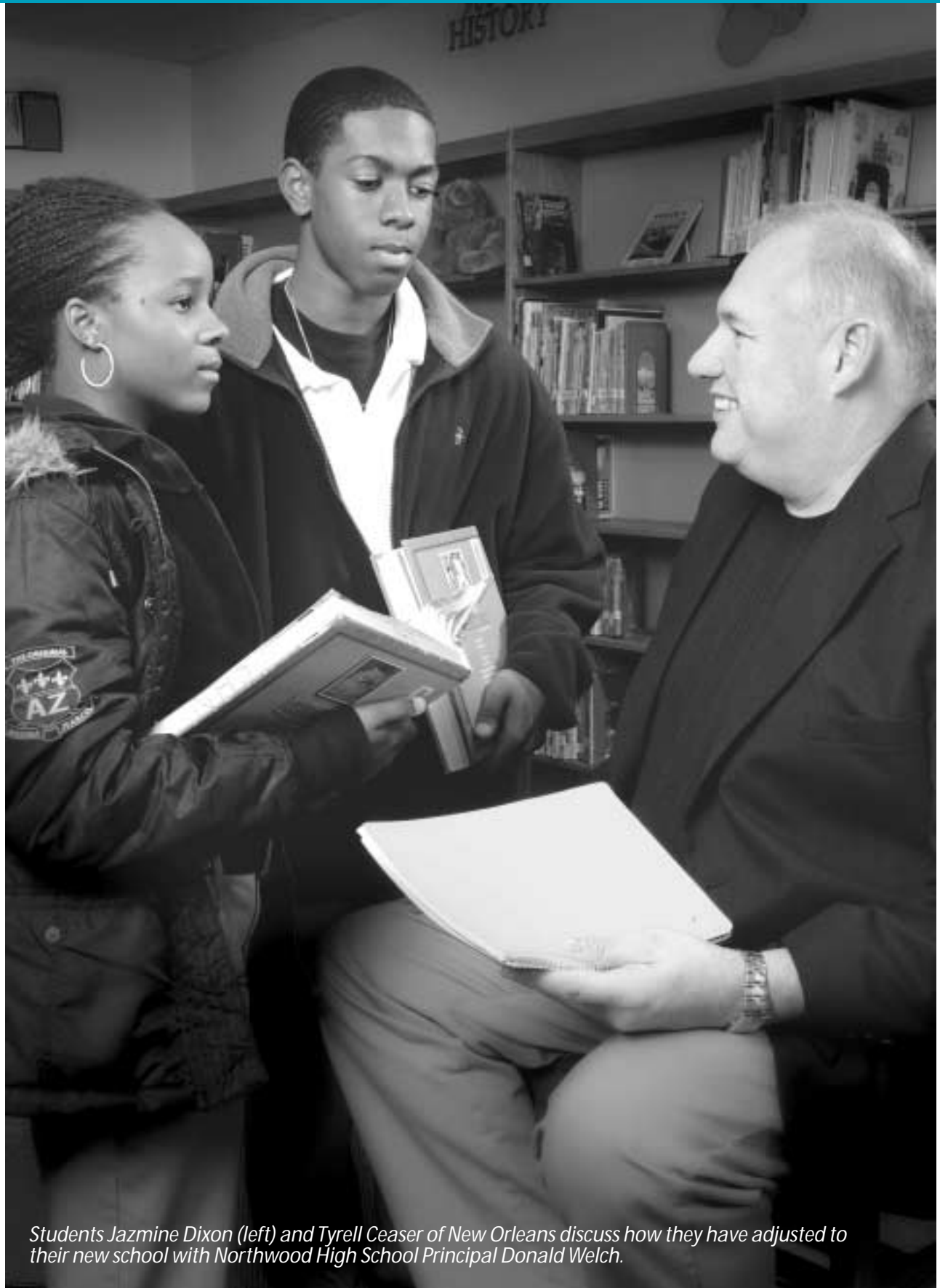
Seastrunk remembers the exact moment she heard about The Rapides Foundation's donation to the United Way and thought to herself how proud she is to be a part of a community that has such "quality people in it that would do such a thing to help their neighbors."

As an executive director, Seastrunk feels this experience has also been personally rewarding in several additional ways. First, it reiterated how strong a team she has working for her at the center. She said her staff of five people immediately kicked in gear and did what needed to be done to provide for the evacuees. Secondly, she said it was a morale booster for her and the staff to see that a relatively small local organization was able to help more than the usual number of folks and still do a quality job.

Indeed, Seastrunk firmly believes she and her staff have been changed forever for the better by this disaster, as has everyone.

"I think that every person who has been touched by this tragedy has been changed," she said. "I think it has been a test for all humanity and people have come together across this great nation who never would have come together before and helped each other in ways they never would have before. It has been the greatest blessing in disguise. It has brought out the best in all of us."

Central Louisiana Schools Impacted



Students Jazmine Dixon (left) and Tyrell Ceaser of New Orleans discuss how they have adjusted to their new school with Northwood High School Principal Donald Welch.

Learning Experience

Central Louisiana Schools Impacted By Hurricanes

Being uprooted from home having lost most all of their belongings, not being able to see old friends and being placed into new schools has been a daunting situation for many of the children who are victims of Hurricane Katrina.

"This whole experience has affected me a lot," 13-year-old Tyrell Ceaser, of St. Bernard Parish, said. "I liked where I used to live; I don't know where some of the people in my old neighborhood are and I miss my friends."

Tyrell's family, like so many others, lost everything in the storm – their home, their clothing, their old lives. And like Tyrell's family, many of them have settled, at least for the school year, here in Central Louisiana. Thousands of children began attending area schools shortly after their arrival and are transitioning into a new life.

For Tyrell, who attends Northwood High School in rural Rapides Parish, the experience of attending a new school has been a good one, although he readily admits he gets very sad when he thinks about home and his old school.

"It has helped me to be here, though, because I have gotten to know a lot of people and made new friends, good friends," he said. "They've helped me out a lot. They have taught me things about basketball I didn't know and I get to play basketball here more than I did at home. They've even helped me with math and my other subjects. I make a lot more As and Bs now."

When Tyrell's family evacuated, they only brought clothes for a few days, expecting to be able to return home after the storm passed. Tyrell said he was lucky to have had even that because so many had nothing.

Getting situated into a new school was made a bit easier thanks to The Rapides Foundation, which earmarked up to \$500,000 for the nine parishes in Central Louisiana to utilize for uniforms, school supplies and such.

Seventeen-year-old Justin Francois, a New Orleans native who lived in the lower Ninth Ward, believes receiving assistance from the school helped him and his family a lot.

"When I got to the school, they treated me very nicely," Justin said. "They gave all of us (evacuees) clothes, uniforms, whatever we needed. It was a big relief because we didn't have a lot of money to start all over. It made me feel really good. I didn't know there were so many nice people in the world."

Like Tyrell, Justin misses home, but admits having a chance to start over was a bit exciting. He plays football and basketball for Northwood High School and compared to the Ninth Ward, said his life is a little easier now because he "doesn't have to worry about anything, like safety, but going to school."

Northwood High School Principal Donald Welch said that at one time, they had 109 evacuee students at the school, but that they are down to about 45, and considers the school lucky to

Central Louisiana Schools Impacted



Third grade student Tiatia Davis works on a computer assignment with Jena Elementary Principal Deborah Mayo.

Learning Experience

(continued from page 21)

have been able to help the children get back on their feet educationally and otherwise.

"We are very appreciative of all the funds we've received from The Rapides Foundation and all of the help the community has provided through the United Way and other organizations," Welch said. "I have been delighted to see all these agencies working together so well to take care of these people."

When it came to taking care of the children, Welch said any issues that came up, he and his staff worked diligently to address them through guidance counselors and their social worker. Additionally, he was moved by the generosity of his students and faculty.

"I have been very impressed with the way our students and faculty have adapted to the new students," he said. "They have mixed well with

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Central Louisiana Schools Impacted

(continued)

them and gone out of their way to help them. I know it has been hard on these evacuees, but they have done well. I am also proud of them.”

Northwood seventh-grader Myesha Gray, of Boyce, feels the experience of helping the evacuees has been a good one, and one that she will “never forget.”

“I gave them clothes, food, shoes, hair accessories for the girls and whatever I could give them,” Myesha said. “My parents gave me money to help me do whatever I could for the kids. I liked having them here, they’re very nice and anything we could do for them, they would accept and were grateful. It has taught me to be very thankful for everything I’ve got because it could have been us, not them, in that situation.”

Myesha said many of the children were quite upset and nervous when they arrived at the school, but that she and fellow students talked to them about what had happened and it helped them move forward.

Like Northwood High School, Jena Elementary in LaSalle Parish also had an influx of evacuees into the school and has approximately 55 students still attending. Jena Elementary Principal Deborah Mayo said her first reaction to the increase in students at the school was to take care of their needs and at the same time, take care of the students who regularly attended Jena Elementary.

“Chief among our concerns was taking care of the evacuee students’ emotional needs,” she said. “It is easier to take care of supplies and clothing, but we wanted to make sure they were okay and would adjust well to their new surroundings. We have a very student-oriented climate here and the children were made to feel welcome. We have gone out of our way to make sure they are not only safe, but are happy and in a productive environment. I believe they have acclimated well and now feel very safe here.”

Initially getting students situated for the classroom meant getting them uniforms,

classroom supplies and much more. As with Northwood, Jena Elementary was also able to utilize funds from The Rapides Foundation to accomplish this goal.

Mayo believes money from the Foundation did for them “what no other emergency funds would have been able to do. This funding allowed us to purchase desks, because we had a shortage of desks, and purchase other items that community and emergency funds could not be used for,” Mayo said.

She is quick to point out that not only did she and the faculty help the evacuees, but so did the students at Jena Elementary and she is very proud of them. Mayo believes the experience has been a great learning one for the children because it taught them to be empathetic for others and it has allowed them to “get out of textbook learning and into real-life learning to help others and reach out to those in need.”

Third-grader Tiatia Davis of Marrero, said she and her brother T.J. were both a bit nervous going into a new school at first, but that it has helped to be in the same school.

“People have been very nice to both of us here,” Tiatia said. “I have made some very good friends at school. When I first came here, I didn’t know there was a canteen and my friend Heather gave me some money to get something and a lot of the other girls have helped me out a lot, too. It has been very different at this school because in New Orleans, we might not get what we want or need; but here the teachers pay attention to us and make sure we have everything we need.”

As with many evacuees, the Ceaser, Francois and Davis families are not going back to New Orleans – they are all staying in Central Louisiana.

“My whole family is here, my aunts, my cousins,” Tyrell said. “We are staying, too, because just knowing that there are so many nice people here that we’ve never met before who care and are willing to help – this gives us a lot of hope.”

Katrina/Rita Student Enrollment

DISTRICT	TOTAL STUDENTS	FUNDS PAID
Allen	210	21,000
Avoyelles	557	55,100
Catahoula	219	15,600
Grant	217	21,700
LaSalle	152	12,100
Natchitoches	224	22,000
Rapides	2,476	247,600
Vernon	513	22,500
Winn	167	9,600
Private/Parochial	660	63,700
TOTAL	5,395	\$490,900

The amounts listed under **Funds Paid** reflect the total funding requested by each district.



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President/CEO:

Joseph R. Rosier, Jr., CPA, CFA

Editors:

Vicki Bernard
Annette Beuchler, MBA, CHE

Contributing Writers:

Dusty Schenofsky Koschny
Anne L'Heureux

For additional copies or to be added to the mailing list contact:

The Rapides Foundation
1101 Fourth Street, Suite 300
Alexandria, LA 71301

Tel: 318-443-3394

Fax: 318-443-8312

Toll Free: 1-800-994-3394

Internet: www.rapidesfoundation.org
e-mail: info@rapidesfoundation.org

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