

The High Cost of Recovery

After I returned from my most recent trip to aid in recovery efforts along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina, I was asked how things had changed in the three months since I was first there in October, soon after the storm. The short answer was, “More FEMA trailers, but surprisingly little less of the original devastation.” Of course, the reality of this devastation was not just about piles of debris and houses with blue-tarped roofs. Mostly it was about the continued suffering of people trying to survive in that community, Pearlinton. The reality of that suffering was indelibly etched in my own memory by an experience I had one day while I was there.

It was Sunday. I had spent most of the past week installing water pumps to help people qualify for FEMA trailers. (Most of the rural areas along that part of the Mississippi coast do not have either public water or sewer. Before the hurricane, they got their water from shallow wells using surface pumps. Those pumps were destroyed by the storm and had to be replaced before a trailer could be placed on the site.) The rest of the pump crew was taking Sunday off, so after church I asked a local friend if he could suggest someone who could use some help that day. He did, and led me to a home site where a FEMA trailer had been recently installed next to the remains of a washed-out residence.

The home site was the property of a handicapped man and his wife. A used washer and dryer had been provided by family members and we were there to install them. Like the water pumps—and any other appliances that used electric motors—their own washer and dryer had been destroyed by the flood. Of course, there is no room to install such major appliances in the kind of travel trailer FEMA provides, so they had to be put outside in a place where they could be securely positioned and the woman could access them easily. The ideal place was behind the trailer, next to the pole that held the breaker box providing electric power to the site.

We needed a platform to support the appliances in the space we selected. Fortunately, we didn't have to build it. (Building materials remained at a premium in the area.) A suitable platform was available, half hidden in the woods behind the trailer. It was the base for a storage shed that the couple had used before Katrina and that had been washed into the woods by the storm. The aluminum walls and roof of the shed had been ripped off and now the base sat in the woods stacked with plastic storage boxes—most of them full of water, but still holding the material that had been stored there. While my friend went to get his tractor, I busied myself cleaning the “debris” off the platform so we could drag it out of the woods.

I'm sure what I went through doing that job that day has been—and will be—repeated many, many times as the process of recovery continues in the area...but for me it was a sobering experience. Most of the boxes contained Christmas decorations. All of them contained things that were obviously considered family treasures. Now they were simply obstacles—obstacles to the next step in recovery for this family. My job was to do away with the obstacles. I did it, but it was extremely distasteful—pouring bins of water-soaked memorabilia onto the ground in the Mississippi woods so that these good people could make the next small step toward recovering a normal life.

We got the washer and dryer installed that day—and, hopefully, it helped make life a little easier for this deserving couple—but I will never completely erase from my memory the image of my part in the destruction of their family history. Yet, I must go back to Mississippi, because an even more indelible image is one revealing the determination of the people of this community to hold onto their faith, conquer their adversities and rebuild their lives. I want to continue to be a part of that effort.

Richard E. Ecker
Downers Grove, IL
February 2006