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Signs of Frustration, Sadness, Humor and Hope in Louisiana Neighborhood

Written by *Doris Wolf*, Special to *Redcross.org*

Tuesday, October 11, 2005 — SLIDELL, La. — Slidell, at the far southeast corner of hurricane-battered Louisiana, assaults the senses with the stench of rotting debris and sweetly sticky mud.

"It's like a nuclear winter," said American Red Cross volunteer Mike Ancharski of Philadelphia, Penn. "What the storm didn't get, the salt water did."

Ancharski is part of a four-person emergency response vehicle (ERV) crew who drive through the devastated Tall Trees neighborhood along the waterfront, serving meals to 300 to 400 residents twice a day.

Volunteers from the Southern Baptist Convention, a partner agency of the Red Cross, prepare the meals under a large tent set up in a parking lot on Front Street.

Ancharski said people seem really grateful to see the red and white van bringing hot meals, ice and snacks. He and his wife, Judy, are first-time Red Cross volunteers who decided that rather than talk about the hurricane, they had to do something to help.

"The people here are really amazing," Ancharski said. "They are so resilient, the way they are coming back after all the destruction this storm has caused."

Evidence of the wrath of Hurricane Katrina and the determination of its survivors is everywhere. Twenty-foot high mountains of soggy sheet rock, pink insulation, broken lumber, tangles of electrical wires, smashed toilets and household goods line the roadway where palm trees and stately oaks used to stand.

Piles of refrigerators, their doors removed or bound with duct tape, form bizarre sculptures. Tractor trailer trucks pulling open-topped containers rounded with debris weave carefully along the two-lane highway to a parking lot along the river, where they are emptied, forming a new levee.

"These people are coming back," agreed Red Cross volunteer Ronald Morehart of Clarksville, Va., a member of the ERV team. "They waded through water seven feet deep, slog through mud up to their ankles and still have smiles on their faces."

Morehart paused to swallow hard. "What really gets to me is when I see them bringing out their family possessions and putting them on the scrap pile."

Signs of frustration and humor line the roadway. "Oct. 4. No water. No sewer. No electricity" is spray painted in black on a chunk of plywood. A white house sits back from the roadway, a large sign

propped in the front yard: "Boat and home for sale. Truck free." The boat is on the roof of the house; the truck is tipped on its side and driven into the ground.

"Luxury condos. Vacancy," reads a vinyl banner attached to the front of a row of brick-faced condos, now gaping shells with blown-out windows and ripped away sides.

In from the shore, along Gauze Street, businesses are slowly reopening. School children in white polo shirts and tan pants with black backpacks walk home from newly opened schools.

Walgreen's is doing a brisk business in cleaning supplies and personal items. Michele Schaeffer of Chalmette, La., waits on customers at the cosmetics counter. She and her 91-year-old mother, who is in a wheelchair, are living with her son in Slidell. She doesn't know when, or if, she will be able to return home.

Schaeffer has applied for financial help from the Red Cross so they can buy clothes and medicine.

"We came out with two sets of clothes each. We thought we were going for a few days and we'd go back home and find a little debris," she said.

She pulled out a plastic bag of 8-by-10 photos of her house and yard, and packets of smaller photos taken inside her home.

"Here's my utility shed with my lawnmower and gardening tools. It used to be in my back yard. Now it's up against my neighbor's house across the street." Photos of her yard show 5-inch thick chunks of dried black mud spread like pieces of cracked asphalt where grass used to grow.

In her kitchen, black and green mold has created a speckled design on the wallpaper. Cabinets have peeled off the walls and fallen in splinters on the counters. Six inches of sticky black mud has flowed down the hallway and into the bathroom.

A dotted black line above the top of the seven-foot tall windows in her living room shows the high water mark. An elaborate crystal chandelier hangs from a bowed ceiling. The bedroom shows peeling veneer on the furniture, tangled soggy bedclothes stripped from the bed and flung against the closet door. Schaeffer hopes to get into her attic sometime to see whether treasured photo albums survived.

She holds up a photo of her front door, bent and battered. "The day of the storm, the man came to collect his \$500 for putting in our storm and screen door," she said.

Then she comes to a photo of a row of small brown plants alongside the house.

"We kept such a nice garden, my mother and I," she said, tears forming at the corners of her eyes. "She enjoyed going out there in her wheelchair and watering the plants with her hose. Now everything is dead."

And then Schaeffer brightens. "I have my job. I have my mother and my family is helping us. We will get by this."

Doris Wolf is a retired journalist from Seneca Falls, N.Y., who volunteers her public affairs skills with the American Red Cross in the Finger Lakes.

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