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- Style
- Health & Fitness
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- Weather
- Directory
- City Map
- Nightlife
- Shopping
- Lodging
- Food/Drink
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- Community
- Calendar
- Discussions
- Resources
- Fun
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- Horoscopes
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[1] 2 3 4 5 Next>

Katrina's Cause: A Disaster Relief Journal

by Esther Friedman
EDGE Contributor
Thursday Nov 3, 2005



A young hospital patient is carried to a waiting bus after being evacuated by airboat on Friday, Sept. 2, 2005. The assistance effort for Hurricane Katrina was among the largest in US history. (Source:AP/Bill Haber)

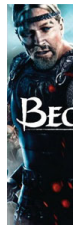
About a month ago I stumbled through my front door in Somerville, exhausted, hungry, and nursing a sore throat. I had just returned from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where I joined the Church of Scientology's hurricane relief effort. As a secular and sometimes, cynical Jewish woman, whose academic liberal democrat parents emphasized critical thinking, spending ten days with the church in the Deep South was something of a fluke. I have never been attracted to organizations, particularly religious ones. I see them as suspect rather than spiritual. In my humble opinion, religions are repeatedly misused to justify and legitimize many awful human failings, like war. Scientology has its own particular mystique; however, I've always suspected this mystique has more to do with money than spiritual enlightenment. Let's just say when looking at the trajectory of my life, I

never said to myself, "I'd like to spend ten days with Scientologists, in the deep-south, toting boxes of bottled water, under a blazing sun, to hurricane victims."

But Katrina hit and our government agencies failed. When my friend Kathy, a twenty-plus year Scientologist, told me she was going to Louisiana, I told her I thought about calling the Red Cross. Each newscast coming out of Gulf Coast broke my heart; I grew weary of feeling helpless to the destruction Katrina left in her wake.

"Why don't you go with us?" Kathy offered.

Two phone calls later, the church purchased a plane ticket for me.



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Somerville Massachusetts, Oct. 27

Fall, my favorite time of year, descends on Boston. I leave my house in sweater and coat and Mississippi's incessant sun feels like a dream. While in Louisiana and Mississippi, my daily worries and predictable life-routines became the receding mental blur: the sizable morning mug of coffee, the accompanying half-an-hour journaling of life worries and woes--repeating themes being love, career, money, time, and creative yearnings. Three pages later, I close the notebook and go on with my day: shower, change, brush teeth, write, check e-mail, make calls, work, buy food, meet colleagues, go to classes, etc. I now appreciate my life's routine like never before.

Gulfport Mississippi, September 13

Roughly 20-25 Scientology volunteers stood knee-high in donated clothing in the middle of a K-Mart parking-lot. We wore yellow "Scientology Volunteer Minister" shirts while standing under a full orange Mississippi moon. (Mercifully we were not under the merciless Mississippi sun.) I turned to a fellow-yellow shirt and said, "I never could have predicted this moment in my life."

We waded through the humid Mississippi stew--commonly known as air--and a clothing sea which spread from the edge of the street to the store front.

Why K-Mart had become an impromptu drop-off center, I don't know. But well-intended souls kept dropping donations, and no one was there to oversee distribution. The sea grew exponentially with each passing hour. We drove past it three to four times daily and on each passing we witnessed its expansion. Weather forecasters predicted rain. The pounding sun, 95 plus degree temperatures, black-top, and the pregnant Mississippi air, promised a mold filled K-Mart parking lot. Bye, bye donated clothing. Gulfport officials, overwhelmed by Katrina's mess, turned to us for help. We yellow-shirts had two hours--due to an 11 p.m. curfew--to pack the clothing into boxes, haul the boxes into a truck, drive the truck to a warehouse and unload.

My new friend Janet from San Francisco turned 360 degrees. We'd already put in a 12-hour-day of hauling boxes--bottled water, canned food, bleach, soap, shampoo, diapers etc--to various Gulfport neighborhoods. And we had transported supplies to Waveland, a town of 7000 that Katrina had wiped off the map. Waveland's devastation surpassed any I'd witnessed to date. All day the relentless sun beat on our yellow backs. We were dirty, sweaty and exhausted.

"You have to be kidding me," she said, her voice echoing the thoughts of present yellow-shirt company. Then we fanned out, waded into the sea, and started throwing clothing in boxes. Soon a Gulfport policeman pulled in to the parking lot, thanked us, and told us not to worry about the curfew.

There's no room to say no when doing disaster relief.

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[1] [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [Next](#)>



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