

Hope for the homeless

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By Zoya Tereshkova

Jessamine volunteers show hospitality to displaced residents of New Orleans

When Walt Jourdan of Nicholasville brought home Mardi Gras beads from his trips to New Orleans in 2001 and 2003, he didn't know that one day he would be taking them back to Louisiana. Last Wednesday night in Opelousas, La., Jourdan was giving away the cheap, shiny necklaces to the displaced residents of New Orleans as a sign of hope.

"For kids, getting those beads was just fun. For adults, it was like bringing back a little bit of memories of happier times," he said.

That day, Jourdan and other volunteers from Jessamine County who participated in a relief trip to Louisiana, helped to cook and serve dinner for evacuees on the grounds of a Best Western Hotel. Hundreds of evacuees stayed in that and other hotels nearby, and many of them came to listen to music and socialize. The future was uncertain for those people; many of them did not know whether their homes in New Orleans survived, and nobody knew for sure if it would be possible to return anytime soon.

"They had no clue what they would be doing next week," said Marisa FitzGerald, another member of the group. "They needed a break. They needed to know there are people who care about them."

The group arrived in Louisiana on Sunday, Sept. 25, and stayed until Friday. People from Jessamine County unloaded a number of trucks at the distribution center in Opelousas, sorted out the donations and assisted evacuees in going through lines and getting what they needed. The group also went shopping and brought truckloads of items that were needed at the center, like peanut butter, macaroni and cheese and chicken noodle soup.

Last Thursday, members of the group from Nicholasville had to take care of the entire distribution center because all the local volunteers had to get ready for the new hurricane.

"They had to take care of their families and get their homes ready," explained Carola Hartley.

While local volunteers were boarding their windows, getting supplies for themselves and sending their families to safe places, the group from Nicholasville kept the distribution center going.

"It was a long week. We worked very hard, and it was very satisfying to know that we helped those folks who really needed help," said Rob Garrison of Nicholasville, who came to Louisiana with his son, Blake, a freshman at Western Kentucky University.

Hartley said that it was also very satisfying to meet volunteers from other parts of the country.

"We had a great partnership with a group from Florida," she said. "We met them one day at the distribution center, and the same night, we were all working together making dinner for the evacuees."

People from Florida, as well as the group from Jessamine County, took time off work or used their vacation time to help out.

"They are all working people who had a lot of responsibilities," she said.

Jourdan said he is ready to go back and do more work as soon as possible, and he has a few friends who are willing to join the next group.

"I truly believe that it's going to be more local people involved instead of national organizations," he said.

Jourdan said that when the group delivered donations and helped out in Louisiana, there was no bureaucracy and no politics involved.

"Everything went straight to the people," he said.

Garrison said there will be an on-going need, and a lot more help will be necessary.

"It's not something you can help out, and three weeks later the need is gone," he said. "It will take a long time to rebuild."

Garrison also said it's better to donate money than items.

"This way, they can buy things in bulk, and volunteers don't have to sort through all the cans," he said.

Hartley said that after the second hurricane, there are even more evacuees in Opelousas.

"They have more than 10,000 now, and they all need food and shelter every day," she said.

For more information or to make a donation, people may call 881-3820.