

THE STORM BEFORE THE STORM

America is sorting the detritus of our Gulf Coast for lessons about our new principle concern: safety while ignoring the related and equally important lessons of poverty to be found under a layer of obscuring toxic sludge from the Mississippi delta on up to the top. Red Cross had converted the Rivercenter across from the Sheraton and Riverboat Casino into a giant shelter. I was night supervisor over the Arena. The clothes that came in by the truck full were not for distribution here I was told. A car salesman who needed a clean shirt yelled at me:

“You got some people in here, you should know!” I knew. They were all people to me, even though I could not offer them even a shower anymore since Rita backed up the drain and the City of Baton Rouge refused to send health inspectors to clear us to open the cleaned bathrooms. They wanted us gone. The vendor that had an exclusive contract to provide food for Rivercenter ‘events’ threatened to sue when we went with a provider more than three times cheaper for our thousands of evacuees.

U.S. Crisis Corps called me up to volunteer in Louisiana. I was already working with evacuees in South Carolina. Force evacuated, they were not told their destination until the planes were in the air. I was surprised Peace Corps deployed its alumni for the first time ever in the U.S. to an Orlando hotel with hot tub and open bar. We had been teamed with FEMA. Their training center had no food so I walked the highway to a mall where a crying Haitian job-hunter showed me at last to a bus route where I waited over an hour and missed the session on government credit card reimbursement. Homeland Security had called up border patrol on per diem, disappointed they could not bring their guns.

When I finally made it to New Orleans tent city would not let me in. They had gone from rescue to recovery mode and ‘contractors’ were banned. I said I was a volunteer and the Rocky Mountain ranger, a Navajo lady, let me in to the ‘No Cover’ area- no saluting necessary. There were still no FEMA openings I was told. I found a Salvation Army food bank and gave out water to endless lines of folk: a man so old he could not lift a single case (they rationed them, though water had no street value there), a man running a make-shift shelter we gave some treats for a boy’s birthday- his sister shot by a security guard, a fellow volunteer, taciturn, escaped from a rehab after the crackers and ketchup packets ran out and the police ran him back up his sheet rope at gun point.

At the Caravan of Hope in Slidell a sign said ‘crisis counseling’. They put their arm on your shoulder and bowed your head to pray before you got your bag of canned food. One can exploded with botulism. It smelled the same as our surroundings and spam sandwiches. Nobody spoke Spanish for the migrant workers. I got a car somehow and went to Saint Helena where the white local kids beat the new black kids at school. On the drive I picked up a couple on the way to get an SSI check to make motel rent by noon. Red Cross had booked all the weekly rate rooms.

I ended up at a FEMA in a bingo parlor in Boutte. The white rural poor were worse off than urbanites used to changing jobs and apartments and living month to month. Most of

these folks had never had papers to their trailers. They had cancer from chemical plants. Their major assets, iceboxes of fish, were not recoverable under FEMA rules of the day. On TV politicians assured no changes after Rita. The next day at briefing we were told the \$2000 relatively strings-free grants were cancelled. Requests for re-inspections (after the fly by) had to be on letterhead from an 'approved' contractor. There were no non-shady contractors for hundreds of miles around. Meanwhile, while we argued with widows over \$20 window frames, mercenaries from Iraq acting as our security pulled thousands for their month's deployment.

There were heroes doing good work too of course. I heard no ill of the blue roofers. Next to a fire station a tall pine tree had fallen through, there stood a dilapidated shack, gaps in the bent wood, no windows to crack, a family's home. It had looked that way, I learned, way before Katrina hit. The fact is much of America lives in a perpetual state of devastation and nobody cares. I cared deeply about the old lady who lost her family Bible with generations of signatures gone in the black water. Now all she wanted was a place to make Thanksgiving turkey but her son's subdivision would not let her stay with him. She cried when I told her the FEMA trailers had no ovens and all I could do was cry with her.

For one hopeful, horrible moment after the Superdome peeled like an onion, we focused our fickle gaze on our many forgotten 'throw-away' people in America, or at least in Louisiana. Then we closed our eyes again. Then we closed our eyes.