Lessons from Katrina

by Kay Albrecht

The journey for me started out with a desperate call for volunteers on the nightly news the day the buses started transporting New Orleans residents displaced by Katrina to the Houston Reliant Center/Astrodome. I was stunned, shocked, and moved by the incredible stories that were being told. As a Louisiana native and a frequent visitor to New Orleans, I recognized the flooded sites, the neighborhoods with water up to the rooftops, and the tragedy of levee breaks. The news report moved me to get out of bed and drive down to see what I could do to help. During the next 17 days, I would learn a great deal about the impact of Katrina on real people, my friends, community, and myself, my early childhood colleagues and the larger early childhood community, our human capacity to help, and much more about disaster relief work. So, what were the lessons of Hurricane Katrina?

The first lesson is that we human beings have an incredible capacity to give. During the first few days in the shelters at Reliant Center/Astrodome, I heard it took 2,500 volunteers per hour around the clock to do what needed to be done. That included medical volunteers (doctors, nurses, pharmacists); crisis counselors and mental health professionals; and volunteers to distribute water and snacks, serve food, sort clothing into sizes and types, distribute first aid kits and personal care essentials, direct traffic, unload tractor trailers full of donated materials and resources, clean bathrooms, sweep the floors, help people find their way to available services, reunite separated families, find lost children, accept donations from the thousands of Houstonians who took it upon themselves to bring something that was needed to the shelters, and lots of "gophers" willing to go for this or that, escort someone to the medical triage area, find a wheelchair, locate a crisis counselor, find some infant formula, and so on. So day after day (and night after night), volunteers arrived to be screened, tagged, and staged to where they were needed. So many arrived, in fact, that there were days and times that volunteers jammed all routes into the area and were ultimately turned away because there wasn't any place else to park. Imagine, full parking lots, not from sports events or concerts, just thousands of people in need and thousands more people willing to do what they could to help.

This was not only true of the general Houston population, but it was especially true of the early volunteers and the early childhood community. As early volunteers saw the need for a place for children to play and pulled together spaces with donated items from the distribution center, they were met with one obstacle after another. (There were four play areas in all — one area in the Astrodome, another in the Astrohall near medical triage, another in medical quarantine, and one in the Reliant Center.)

Soon, the volunteers coalesced around the goal of one appropriate and well resourced play space in the Reliant Center and everyone went to work. A phone call to Lakeshore Learning Materials resulted in a truckload of donated classroom furniture and materials. E-mail notes to colleagues about immediate needs caused early childhood educators from throughout the area to load up their canvas convention bags and head out to read stories to children, share crayons and paper, and volunteer in the play area. The need for more volunteers mobilized the Houston

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NAEYC affiliate to add a volunteer sign up to their web site, a local non-profit to field calls and take reservations for volunteer shifts, and the local resource and referral agency to put out the call for help. A group of experienced directors, consultants, and licensing staff gathered to figure out how to manage the 5,000 sq. ft. play space within acceptable health and safety parameters under difficult circumstances, and hundreds of teachers, administrators, and ECE professionals mobilized their personal networks to find volunteers to fill the new schedule. Plans were made to collaborate with a local school district to use part of the play space to implement a pre-kindergarten program for children who were too young to get on the school buses. Those that couldn't volunteer directly provided resources. Children's books arrived by the box load. Zipper bags filled with crayons, paper, and games for children to take back to their cots appeared from families in a faith-based community. Children's toys, games, and art supplies arrived from early childhood folks from Maine to Washington.

I learned we have so much to give. We are a resource-rich nation. Out of garages, closets, wallets, and our hearts came the resources, both physical and financial, to help an estimated 25,000 people in one shelter site and an estimated 250,000 people throughout Texas in other shelter sites, hotels, and private homes. These numbers for Houston and Texas are staggering in and of themselves. As I have talked to others involved as first responders and volunteers throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, the numbers are overwhelming. Over a million Gulf Coast residents now reside elsewhere in Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and beyond, touching almost every state in the nation.

The third lesson was about patience. Time in the shelters started out chaotic and improved incrementally every day. Yet in the process, change was a constant. The approved entrances for volunteers changed daily. Registration locations for volunteers moved all over the three building sites. Medical services expanded, then moved, then consolidated. Resources expanded only to contract or disappear the next day. One day there was a shortage of water; another day, there was an abundance. Such was life in the shelters. In the midst of all of these potential frustrations, evacuees and volunteers persevered, found ways to make things happen, took the initiative to improve what they could, and found the energy to walk from ever more distant parking lots to begin and end their volunteer shifts.

Another lesson is to take media reports with a grain of salt. Reports of negative experiences filled the television, radio, and the Internet. Reported threats were everywhere. An elderly woman who was having trouble sleeping asked me if the reports of rape and theft were true. A single mother shared that she hadn't slept in four days because she was worried about the reports of violence against evacuees. As you now know, most of these reports were proved to be unfounded. My own experience included an absolute absence of fear — I was never concerned for my personal safety or felt threatened in any way by individuals or the situation. Every person I met or worked with was appreciative of my efforts. I walked unattended to my car at all hours of the day and night without any concern except the day I worked 14 hours and was finally headed home at 2 a.m. A police officer sensed my exhaustion as I left and offered me a ride to my car that was gratefully accepted.

A volunteer unloads puzzles and games near an infant area.

We were all tuned to each other's "states." I pulled a beach umbrella out of the trunk of my car to share with youth volunteers directing traffic in the 100-degree heat while other volunteers offered cold water. As I fed breakfast to a stroke victim, someone watching me kneel in the crowded aisle cleared a nearby cot for me to sit on. Police officers volunteered to conduct criminal background checks on waiting volunteers, using their personal cell phones when we had more children in the play area than approved volunteers on the floor.

At every turn, evacuees offered to help. They unpacked boxes when the new furniture and supplies were delivered, moved police barricades that served as "walls" into the play space, thanked us at every turn for our generosity, swept up spills and messes made by others, and in general, helped to make their shelter home away from home as livable as possible under the circumstances. News reports included the sensational and the dramatic — most of our day-to-day experiences were neither. This oversight skewed perceptions and created unnecessary issues and concerns that were not supported.

Teacher and Exchange author Masami Mizukami helped unpack and arrange furniture 'til the middle of the night!

I learned a tremendous amount about disaster relief. In the early stages of disaster relief, the focus is on shelter, food, and safety. Over time, structures and policies are implemented and the chaotic pace of the first few days settled into a more systematic and planful process. When the approved provider of child care arrived on the shelter scene nine days after the child's play space

Volunteers unpacked the Lakeshore delivery.

opened, it would have been easy to be angry and upset about being replaced. Instead, we all took a deep breath and helped the approved provider identify what equipment they needed to continue to provide services to children and families in the shelter and helped them move and arrange our donated equipment to open the next day. From this experience, the importance of formal arrangements and agreements with disaster relief organizations became apparent, leading to work at the national level (from the top down) and the local level (from the bottom up) to anticipate and formalize plans to be more prepared and at the table if we are ever faced with another disaster.

I also learned how much the early childhood community has to offer in disaster situations. We are well prepared to support families in dealing with the aftermath of a disaster. Our skills and strengths are exactly what is needed for young children and their families in such situations. Early childhood educators are "can do" people. We saw opportunities, found avenues, worked hard, persisted, and most of all, used our considerable interaction skills to slowly but surely bring smiles back to children's faces and the joy of uninterrupted play to a setting woefully lacking in opportunity and alternatives. It was a wonderful contribution.

That experiences linger is the last lesson. Time has passed and I am amazed at how experiences linger. I still wonder what happened to Blake, a four year old who was separated from his mother; how Lily found her only living relative who was somehow put on a different bus; if Roy found work. Did the child who could only pound on the pounding bench find other positive ways to express his intense feelings? Did the family of five with the six-day-old baby find a place to live? How wonderful it felt to stand back in the middle of the night and view the fully arranged play space that took dozens of volunteers from the ECE community near and far and team after team from the volunteer staging center to complete. The collegiality, professionalism, and skills of the ECE community accomplished together more than any of us dreamed was possible.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

Almost three weeks after the last families were put on buses or airplanes to evacuate for Hurricane Rita, I was reminded of the connections created throughout the early childhood community by the aftermath of Katrina. In Fairbanks, Alaska, ECE colleagues presented their Fairbanks Association for the Education of Young Children Fall Conference speaker with 220 handmade blankets and multi-cultural children's books to deliver to the Katrina children in Houston. I am quite sure that this is only one example of the many continuing contributions of the ECE community to relief and recovery efforts for Katrina victims. My sincere thanks to all of them.

A library area full of donated books!

Early Childhood Development in Emergencies authored by Save the Children, USA will appear in the Spring 2006 edition of the *Coordinators' Notebook*, a publication of The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, a World Forum Alliance Member, www.ecdgroup.com