

VOSH-VA aids Hurricane Katrina victims

By Victoria Molner Weiss, OD, President, VOSH-VA

We all watched on August 29th, 2006, as Hurricane Katrina raced towards New Orleans. Then we were horrified as massive flooding occurred when the levees gave way. We witnessed on TV what was reality for the residents of New Orleans and we wondered what we could do to help.

I personally knew that as an optometrist, my greatest ability to help Katrina victims would come later as we are not typically first responders. Some optometrists who reside nearer to Louisiana were able to help with ocular disease and with glasses right after the disaster, mainly at the Houston Astrodome.

VOSH-Virginia (Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity) and RAM (Remote Area Medical) have worked closely together on many projects for the past 8 years, including last year's mission to Wise, VA, where we set the world record for the largest number of patients seen in a 3-day clinic in the world. I immediately called Stan Brock, leader of RAM, to see what we could do to help. (Indeed, RAM was one of the first planes allowed to fly into New Orleans with supplies, medical doctors (2 from the University of Virginia), one optometrist and one ophthalmologist.)

Stan and I began making plans for a "probable clinic" in New Orleans. Thanks to the AOA (American Optometric Association) News, VOSH/INTERNATIONAL and RAM we were able to recruit the needed optometrists, paraoptometricians, opticians and general assistants to help with the project. Some 1,350 volunteers from all over the country traveled to New Orleans in early February to provide a combined medical, dental, eye care, veterinary, and pharmaceutical care clinic. Pap smears were provided and many patients seen were able to leave with their medical record on a computer disk or memory chip. It was an extraordinary undertaking. Dr. Erin Brewer, Director of the Center for Community Health in the State of Louisiana helped coordinate the needed licensing requirements and provided support for the clinic.

I was able to bring my 13-year-old son JW, as well. The clinic itself was a most amazing and wonderful experience. I am so thankful that we had the opportunity to help and participate.

Patients we examined were all thankful to have us there. It was immediately clear that there is still a lot of need. Many patients still did not have their glaucoma medications. We were able to provide samples to hold them over and set them up with follow up care. There were also many who still did not have their eyeglasses.

The clinic was held at the Audubon Zoo. We were literally situated in the "swamp," with alligators swimming below us. We were able to set up twelve refracting lanes with help from Jose Cadena of Affordable Portables. He also brought along phoropter stands. We had 7 slit lamp stations and two Binocular Indirect Ophthalmoscope stations and we had tons of donated eye drops.

With our Optometric team of over 35, from Monday, February 6 to Sunday February 12, we saw 1,735 eye patients for complete eye examinations; 1,334 individuals received eye glasses from the on site lab. Optometrists included Drs. Victoria Molnar Weiss, Kathy Clark-Gelburd, Alan Toler, Greg McGrew, Ken Nix, Chuck Sanders, Theresa Solaski, Greg Noah, Aileen Brouwer Schinderle, Adam Paddock, Kathy Fenton, Wendy Waguespack, Michele Cazet, Sandra Wang-Harris, Kefla Brown, Jeff Anastasio, Stephanie White, Sheila Doyle, Christine Norred and Marnie Genre.

Ophthalmologists were Drs. Muhammad Kayani, Fred Gregg and Robin Rice. Paraoptometricians were Terrie Call, Tina Lewis, Ashlee Gilmer, Mercedis White and Don Hall, an ophthalmic technician. We had Jeremy Weiss, Kelli Booth and Blair Smith and Fran as assistants. We also had a fabulous RN, Maxine Counihan. Lion's Club member Harry Rennis helped to maintain a moderate flow of patients. Gene Marsh, Jose Cadena, Madison and Huber as well as many local students were of great assistance as well. Optometrists traveled from Virginia, Michigan, Ohio, Alabama, Louisiana and more!

My son was delighted to stand beside and pet the elephants. He even touched the White Tiger, thanks to Nanette, Director of Community Relations at the zoo. Nannette was invaluable to our success while working at the zoo-from finding me a photocopier to getting patients from the entrance to the eye clinic in the swamp via the tram.

One of my personal favorite patients was a little girl named Kayla. She was seven years old and about a -1.50 myope. She talked and smiled for reporters and she loved posing for the camera in her new pink glasses.

There was another family that I recall with 3 children who were from New Orleans East. They had lived in 3 different places since the Hurricane: 2 different homes in Georgia and presently in Seidel, LA, near New Orleans. The family is scattered. One child is finally back at his original school. Another child is at the school in Seidel and living with his aunt there. He may stay there and not go back to New Orleans. None of his friends are there anymore and he has now made some new friends. His mother said that their house should be ready in August. That will make it a full year out of their home.

A gentleman named Renaldo from the 9th ward opened up to me as well. He was wearing a beautiful tiger's eye ring that I commented on. It turns out that he found it among the rubble that was his home. He said that he also found some money in a shirt pocket when he went back. He was also able to salvage a few photos from the "sludge." He wiped them with disinfectant and then scanned what was good and then framed them. He felt that it made it better for him to have these few momentos.

Another person now living in Metairie with his cousin commented about Mardi Gras. He felt that it was hard to celebrate the big event as he'd just buried his wife and son this very week of the celebration.

It seemed that everyone we talked to was affected-people from all walks of life. Even waiting to go into a restaurant, people in line were talking about getting their house fixed up or getting a job. Some of the optometrists from LA told us about how their families were affected, if not themselves. The people who worked at the zoo had their own stories as well. It seems that many people stayed or are staying with relatives.

Overall our experience was incredible. It was unbelievable to see the devastation up close. There were unusable cars parked under the interstate for miles and miles. We saw homes that were completely collapsed. We saw homes with cars on top of them and that were on top of each other. There were clothing rods with clothes partially on them in the middle of the front lawn. Words cannot really describe what it looks like to look in the doorway of what was once a living room, now completely destroyed.

As you go from the areas that weren't damaged by the levee breach you can gradually see the line where the flood reached. It starts as a few inches and grows to rooftop height. You can just imagine what it must have been like during the flooding.

Seeing and feeling New Orleans is so different from actually being there. New Orleans is not just like any other city. It is truly a place that is special. You need to visit and see for yourself.

Hopefully we helped make some of the people who have suffered so much do better. Many people told us and wrote to us to tell us that we made a difference. I think we did help them medically but also, hopefully, we helped them feel cared for by us. As one local optometrist stated, "the human community needs to be restored just as much as the physical one."