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The Mississippi Coast 2005

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When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, most of what we heard about in New York was the damage done in New Orleans. New Orleans got the headlines but Katrina affected the coastal areas of three states; Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Requests went out from those states for help and one of those requests, Mississippi, found its way the New York City Department of Buildings. Our Commissioner agreed to send ten of us with five SUVs and whatever equipment was needed to help with structural assessment. Since I handled our agency's response to local emergencies I was chosen as team leader. I spoke to my contact, a building official named Steve Mitchell, in Pascagoula, and was told he could get us a place to sleep, food and gas but we should expect living conditions to be austere. I got more volunteers than I could use but chose a mix of engineers and inspectors who I knew as good field people and who could handle austere."

After two days of driving we arrived at the border of Jackson County. That was as far as our instructions took us. We already were seeing downed trees and overturned trailers miles from the coast. Stopping at sort of a combination gas station-fried chicken restaurant we called for further directions. We were told that there had been a possibility we would stay at a military base but a tent city had been erected for volunteers in Vancleave so that's where we headed. As far as tents go it turned out to be luxurious, with wooden floors, clear plastic windows and air conditioning.

The Mississippi Emergency Management contact who was showing us our cots got a call on his cell phone and said, Fellers, this is your lucky day. He went on to say Hurricane Wilma was expected within days and they didn't want to put any more people in a camp where they would have to be evacuated. They found us rooms in the Imperial Palace, a damaged casino hotel in nearby Biloxi that FEMA had taken over. This meant real beds and showers but we were warned us not to drink or brush our teeth with Biloxi tap water. A sign on the highway at the Biloxi exit said Biloxi Is Closed to Anyone but Residents and FEMA Employees. When we got into the town we saw it was devastated. Not long before we arrived everything had been under twenty-six feet of water. The sides of the street looked like they were covered with garbage but it wasn't garbage at all. We were seeing normal household items which had been washed out of houses mixed with mud and left there by the storm surge.

The casino hotels were still standing but most of their first and second floors were gone, washed out by the surge. Steel or reinforced concrete columns were all that remained at that level. Curtain walls, windows, partitions and furniture were washed away and the rest of the hotel was intact above. The only way into the upper part of our hotel was through the three-story reinforced concrete garage ramp since lower stairways and elevator shafts no longer existed. We drove up and then entered at the third floor. It was an L shaped building and the wing that faced the Gulf and took serious wind and flying debris damage. Windows and sections of curtain wall were missing but repairs were already underway when we arrived. FEMA took over the rooms in the relatively undamaged wing to house some local displaced residents and volunteers from all over the country. The atmosphere at the hotel reminded me of New York in the time after 9/11 when we were the host to out-of-state help, but now we New Yorkers were the guests. I thanked one of the FEMA locals for her helpfulness and hospitality and she said she should be thanking us.

We arrived at the Gautier City Hall and were welcomed by a group of officials. They thanked us for coming and gave us some local maps. One official said something like as soon as we get a quiet evening I'm sure we can boil and burn something for all y'all. I knew he said something positive so I thanked him. I found out later he was inviting us to dinner. A local phrase book would have probably been more useful for us New Yorkers than a map but I eventually learned y'all was the singular you but got the impression all y'all was something like us saying you guys in New York.

We split up into five teams, two men per car, just as we had driven from New York. Two teams went to Pascagoula and two stayed in Gautier. Jack and I became partners by default since we were the only ones who smoked. No one wanted to share a car or room with us. He and I followed Greg Wilson to his Building Department office in Ocean Springs. It's a small but beautiful historic town right on the Gulf. I was told that traditionally, wealthy merchants from New Orleans and planters from the north of the state had summer homes there because of the pleasant climate.

Greg took us for a ride through town to give us an idea of how to get around and also show us some of the destruction we would be facing. He mentioned debris fields but we couldn't grasp what he was talking about until we saw the first one. It was furniture and shingles and toys and books. It was everything that once made up people's homes, mangled by the storm and spread over acres.

Houses along the beach roads were almost all gone and piles of household and organic debris along the roads were waiting to be picked up by the Army Corp of Engineer (ACE). They had cleared fallen power lines and plowed debris from the roads in the days following the storm but most of what lay beyond the street line remained untouched. Along the shore and for some distance inland any trees still standing were filled with a tangle of clothing, bed linen and drapery up to a height of about twenty feet. Although left at random by the retreating storm surge it was eerily reminiscent of Halloween decorations. After hearing news only about New Orleans we were surprised to see how extensive the destruction in Mississippi really was.

Greg told us that since it was our first day we should just drive through town to familiarize ourselves with its layout and if we saw any construction going on, to stop and see if the contractors had permits. A lot of out-of-county contractors were coming to Jackson County because of all the work needing to be done and some of them were crooked. Jack and I made our first stop at a re-shingling job. We asked the workers for their permit and they called their boss. He showed up with a license but no permit. We didn't stop the work because re-shingling was a health and safety issue but gave him an application and told him to get permit the next day. At the next stop, again there was no permit. We did a few more of these until the end of the day. When we got to the office the next morning Greg was grinning and said we were very effective. A line of contractors applying for permits was extending out of the doors of City Hall when he arrived. Word got around that inspectors with Bronx accents were in Ocean Springs to enforce the building code.

Although he appreciated our effectiveness, Greg diplomatically suggested to us that we try to be sensitive with homeowners who had suffered such tremendous losses. We decided that meant there would be times when we should tone down our very business-like and sometimes abrupt New York inspection style.

It didn't take long for us to get an opportunity to be sensitive. We were inspecting a house not far from the Ruskin Oak which fortunately after 800 years was still standing when a couple walked over to see if we were with FEMA. We told them who we were and then listened to their story. They decided to stay through the hurricane. Water from the storm surge flowed into bayous, inlets and other depressions, even low lying streets, filling and overflowing them. The water rose gradually and filled houses to varying degrees depending on elevation.

Water slowly started to fill their street and when it reached about six feet they decided they would have to swim to higher ground.

Their feisty twelve year old daughter said, There was nothing scary about it. It was like watching a bath tub fill up."

The husband wrapped the cat in a towel and the wife and daughter each hung on to one of their Cocker Spaniels and swam to a neighbors house at a higher elevation. They were living in a trailer now. Although their home had only minor structural damage, it was infested with mold. Despite all this they were happy to be together and the daughter was very proud they were able to save their pets. When the Wal-Mart reopened a few days later, Jack and I got them some dog and cat food and left it at the door of their trailer. For the few first days only a small number of businesses were open. We were able to get breakfast and dinner at the Imperial Palace but were on our own for lunch. There was a Red Cross food van that was surprisingly good. We had to go to Camp Vancleave fairly regularly to have our laundry done and to get gas at the FEMA tank truck. Jack and I made it a point to go in the morning so we could have Mohler's excellent donuts for breakfast.

Eventually a family run restaurant on Bienville Boulevard called BBs Poboy reopened and Jack and I became regulars.

Our waitress apologized for not having any of their famous Gulf shrimp saying, The boats hadnt been able to go out because of the flotsam left by the storm. The proprietors and staff were glad to be back and their customers were happy to see them. When we talk in New York were usually exchanging information, in Mississippi they exchange pleasantries and it really was a pleasure being surrounded by such nice people. The food was good enough for us to go through their whole menu in the weeks we were in Ocean Springs but more than that, lunch time was an hour of gentile normalcy taken out of what was usually a bleak day.

Katrinass effect on waterfront structures was to demolish and wash them away. Housing lots were covered with a mix of wreckage from their own and neighboring houses and a debris line floated thirty miles out into the Gulf. There wasnt much need to inspect structures affected by the storm surge except to recommend demolition or debris removal. We were looking for an address at the end of Shearwater Drive closest to the shore. House numbers, street signs and mailboxes were mostly all gone so finding addresses was difficult. As usual, along the shore, not much was standing except some trees and maybe a few steps leading up to what was once a front door. In the midst of this we found a lone man looking through the remains of houses left on his property. We said good morning and asked if he could help us find an address. It turned out he owned one of the properties we were looking for and needed our help in arranging to have fallen and leaning trees removed. Instead of getting immediately down to business we let him talk.

Im a rich man, he said. I once had a 7000 square foot house here and its not just destroyed but every last piece or it is gone. I can afford the monetary loss but the emotional loss is weighing heavy on me. That house was filled with things that meant something to my family and now I cant even find a picture of my children when they were babies. Our next stop was long driveway off Shearwater Drive called Potter Road. All of the houses were destroyed but the potters who lived and worked there were working hard to rebuild the Shearwater Pottery and start over. We met Naomi, the woman whose name was on the inspection request.

She introduced her daughter who said, All we need is for the Corps to get rid of those downed trees and we can handle the rest ourselves."

We wished them luck and started making notes and taking pictures of the things that the ACE should deal with.

We had to go to a location referred to as the Compound. A woman who owned the property was waiting for us. She wanted to have upturned roots and other organic debris removed. Fire had become a major

concern since Jackson County had less than a half inch of rain since the hurricane. In shore areas the salt water flooding had killed vegetation and thick carpets of dried reeds were left by the storm surge.

I asked if she also needed any demolition or structural debris removal.

She said, It may not look like much now but thats Frank Lloyd Wrights Charnley Summer Residence. Im trying to get help from the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation to get it back on its foundation."

She added that Louie Sullivan built two houses on the adjoining property.

When I turned to look she said, You wont be able to see them. Theyre in the Gulf now.

We had an ACE inspection for fallen trees about one block inland. The property was owned by a retired physician, Dr. Morgan. Fallen trees lay all around his house but amazingly none had hit it. He said he didn't evacuate during the storm.

Lived in this house for thirty-five years and weathered five major hurricanes here. I didn't think Katrina would be any worse. The house took about a foot of water but my greatest loss was my Jaguar. Had it parked at a lower elevation where it was submerged and destroyed by salt water corrosion."

He didnt seem too concerned about the near misses of the trees that could have killed him but he mourned the loss of his Jaguar.

We got to a previously flooded house that had its sheet rock and insulation stripped so it would dry out and mold wouldnt form. The elderly couple who lived there was staying in a trailer parked on their front lawn with all of their belongings spread out in the sun around them. We introduced ourselves and the woman knew we were from New York by our badges or more likely our accents. They had lived in Connecticut and retired to Ocean Springs.

She said, Id like to give you guys a big hug because I had so many happy times in New York. She did and we hugged her back.

We were very careful about making an attempt to knock before entering even if there was no door or there were large gaps in the walls. Two reasons for this were: first, although severely damaged, these were still peoples homes and second, we didnt want to be mistaken for looters. We were warned about that possibility so we wore uniform shirts or reflective safety vests and hardhats. We also wore our New York City Department of Building badges, FEMA and local jurisdiction photo IDs and carried clipboards even if we didn't need them. Few things make you look as official as you do when carrying a clipboard.

We once knocked on a door and waited a long time for an answer.

The home owner finally let us in and said It wasn't locked."

I said, After all of the YOU LOOT, WE SHOOT signs we had seen I didnt think it would be a good idea to just walk in."

He replied, There was no need for concern. All of my guns were washed away.

That sure made us feel safer.

As we left a woman waved us over to a neighboring foundation slab which still had a few remaining upright posts standing on it. She asked if we were with her insurance company. We told her we were working with the local Building Department and she invited us in although there was really no house to invite us into.

She said, I couldnt find any parts of my house. I guess its floating in the Gulf, but come in anyway.

She managed to find a few pieces of her furniture and personal items that she had put on the concrete slab which was about all that remained of her house. She set up some chairs with a beach umbrella, a small table and a cooler with water bottles in it. She had made a living room, although without walls or roof, where she would wait for her FEMA representative or insurance agent. She was angry with FEMA for not doing enough and with her insurance company for giving her more obstacles than help. With all of this she was still pleasant with us and asked us to stay and have something to drink. We chatted for a while, thanked her for her hospitality and continued with our inspections.

In areas close to the shore, often all that was left of a house was a foundation slab in a debris field. We could see the outline of the house and marks on the floor where the walls and plumbing were so we would get some idea of how people lived there. Some looked as though the home owner did a little housekeeping and swept it clean of the reeds and other dead vegetation which carpeted the surrounding areas. On a number of the worst sites we found collections of undamaged items we supposed were salvaged by the home owner and neatly arranged on a corner of the slab; a birdcage, a kitchen spatula, a vase, a dish, a trophy. Nothing prepared us for seeing these poignant little still lifes in the most desolate places. It was sad and yet the few people we met generally had high spirits and were ready to fight back and rebuild.

An old man pointed out a large oak that had been split by the wind and although it looked ready to fall was still standing. If it fell one way it would hit his house and if it fell the other it would take down power lines and close his street. He asked when the ACE would come to remove it. We told him we couldn't say for sure but it would be soon.

He grinned and said, "If they take too long I might get my axe and do it myself."

He was eighty-five years old but we believed he would.

We worked in desolate evacuated areas. Usually we saw no people except for the occasional home owner and some contractors. Any open hospitals were a good distance away so we were advised to be safe and so avoid the need for a hospital. Before we left New York we got tetanus and diphtheria shots but had no time for the Hepatitis series. We worked in teams of two. Jack and I relied on one another's care for minor mishaps in the field and if necessary a FEMA first-aid follow-up back at the hotel. We checked for leaning trees and hanging branches before getting close enough to inspect a structure. Then exteriors were inspected first considering chances of collapse and before going in we looked for falling hazards and possible voids under walking surfaces.

Structural hazards weren't all we had to contend with. In many of the areas we inspected there were no people and hadn't been for weeks. Pets were abandoned and dogs were starting to become feral. We tried to avoid them but found they weren't as bad as watch dogs left alone on abandoned property and still guarding their home territory. When entering a house with significant mold we wore respirators. FEMA recommended we do our laundry the day before we left for home so we wouldn't take back any mold on our dirty clothes. One of our inspectors came across a five foot alligator sunning itself at the edge of a bayou in the backyard of a house he was inspecting. It had been abandoned by people and now Nature was reclaiming the Mississippi coast.

We were getting flat tires from driving over debris and the Ocean Springs public works garage was fixing them for us. The first time we went to have a flat fixed we noticed the mechanics weren't wearing the usual overalls. Instead they were dressed in white shirts and pants with broad green horizontal stripes. They were convicts and although I'd only seen these striped suits in movies that's what they wore in Jackson County. After they quietly and efficiently did their job I asked their guard if it would be all right if I tipped them. He said, "That really would not be necessary sir. So I didn't."

We spent our last day on Eagle Nest Road, one of the most devastated areas we'd worked in so far. It was a section of land extending unprotected into the Mississippi Sound and must have been beautiful but now it was the largest debris field we had seen. The street was cleared but the lots were filled with broken

sections of houses and the usual household items. When we arrived we didn't think we would be able to find any of the addresses we needed but noticed someone not too far down the street. We assumed it was his lot and that he might know the neighborhood. I asked if he could help with any of the locations we were looking for. He wasn't sure of the addresses but was familiar with the names of people on our inspection requests who used to be his neighbors. He directed us by counting driveways; Wilson was three driveways to the right and Noble was the one after that, and so on. He was very helpful. As we walked to the first lot it occurred to us he had been sweeping his driveway. A bulldozer would have made more sense than a broom. It seemed odd that with so much destruction around him he thought could accomplish anything. After a few minutes he came over to ask us if we would report an abandoned car. We had done this before. The procedure was to contact the Police Chief who would arrange for it to be towed.

He said, "I'm sure it was abandoned and I know who abandoned it. It was my brother's. He was killed in the storm."

As he was talking to us he kept stooping to pick up small pieces of glass and scraps of paper from the ground, trying to tidy a little area amidst the destruction. We assured him we would report the car and he went back to his sweeping. I called Greg at the Building Department and explained what we had come across. He said he would get some help out to him. I continued inspections in the vicinity and Jack stayed with him making small talk until a Red Cross psychiatrist arrived. I had worked with Jack for quite a long time in New York. He was an astute inspector but known as being a bit of a curmudgeon. In our time on the Mississippi coast I got to see a different side of him.

At a briefing before we left New York I was told to look for signs of stress, fatigue and depression. Seeing so much destruction and hearing so many sad stories probably got us down but generally we held up pretty well. It was suggested we make it a point to spend time together and if possible, eat together. The ten of us usually sat at one table for either breakfast or dinner at the hotel. This gave everyone a chance to talk about what they had seen and done during the day.

Toward the end of our stay some local building and fire officials invited all of us for dinner at their favorite Irish pub in Pascagoula. They served us corned beef and cabbage with homemade soda bread and the Guinness flowed like water. After dinner a lot of locals showed up just to meet the inspectors from New York and they all made a point of shaking our hands and thanking us for coming such a long way to help them. A little embarrassed by the compliment, we in turn, thanked them for their hospitality. On our last night in Mississippi my newly sensitive partner Jack became his old negative New York self again and said, "Did you notice it didn't rain and we hardly even saw a cloud in the sky the whole time we were here? Good thing. It was depressing enough with the sun shining."

The ten of us did over twelve hundred inspections during our time in Jackson County and except for a few corrupt contractors everyone appreciated the work we did. We said goodbye to the people we worked with and left them NYC caps and some of our uniform shirts. They gave us their local agency tee shirts in return. It was like the end of a game when teams exchange uniforms.

So the inspectors from New York left early in the morning, anxious to complete the two day drive back home. We felt badly about leaving with so much work left undone but we knew we would be replaced by other volunteers and we had also seen enough of the people of the Mississippi Gulf Coast to know they were resilient and up to the challenge of rebuilding.

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