



BUILDING, REBUILDING

CARRIERS HAMMER HOMES FOR HURRICANE VICTIMS

A small band of active and retired letter carriers from Washington state trekked 2,100 miles southeast to Louisiana's Gulf Coast in April to carry on the disaster recovery efforts still taking place four years after the one-two punch of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita ravaged the region, killing hundreds and leaving tens of thousands homeless.

Led by Seattle Branch 79's Cecil "Mac" McKenzie, NALC members from both Seattle and Tacoma spent a week working with volunteers from New York, Maryland, Florida and Canada to help the non-profit Habitat for Humanity organization build two new homes in Harvey, a small suburban town in Jefferson Parish across the Mississippi River from New Orleans.

"Our teams worked well together—we all had a 'git-er-done' attitude," said Jack Hayes, a member of the Branch 79 contingent that also included Brooks Bennett, Jack Gilmore, Sally Knowle, J.D. Stewart and Connie Wigle. Rick Baird from Branch 130 rounded out the group.

When they arrived on the scene, the NALC members realized they had quite a week of work ahead. "The first house was just a foundation, floor joists and a sub-floor when we began work," Hayes recalled. "The second house had one-third of its outside wall sections up."

No strangers either to long workdays or extreme temperatures, the letter carrier crew kept going from early in the morning to deep in the afternoon, often in the stifling heat and humidity for which the Bayou State is renowned.

After five days of hammering—not to mention sweating—"all the outside walls of the first house were standing

tall and in place," Hayes said. On the second house, "the outside and inside walls were completed, and two-thirds of the exterior plywood was nailed up. When we laid our tools down on Saturday afternoon, we were proud of all we had accomplished."

According to the Habitat for Humanity website, the organization has built more than 300,000 houses all over the world since it was founded in 1976, providing affordable shelter to more than 1.5 million people in nearly 3,000 communities.

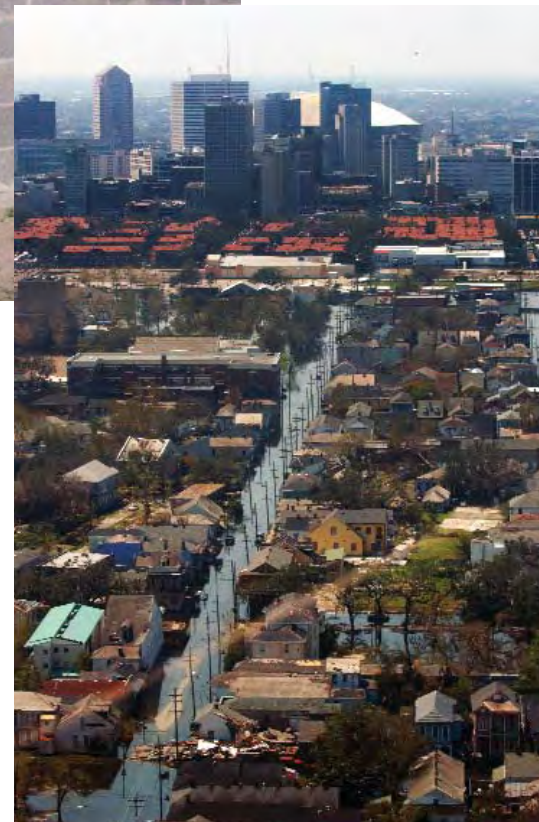
And thanks to some help from a few community-minded letter carriers from the Pacific Northwest, Habitat can now make two more of its modest, low-cost homes available to deserving Louisiana families displaced by the 2005 storms.

Hayes provides a touching first-person account of his group's work in the Seattle Branch Item appearing on page 67 of this issue of *The Postal Record*.

BRICK BY BRICK

The 2005 Atlantic hurricane season still holds the record as the most intense and active one ever, with 28 named storms, many Category 3 and higher, with sustained winds of up to 130 miles per hour. The worst were two Category 5s.

The first and most infamous was Katrina, which battered the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and Louisiana August 29-30. Beyond the devastating winds and driving rain, Katrina's storm surge was so intense it overwhelmed New Orleans' aging levees, destroying whole neighborhoods and leaving much of the city under several feet of water for weeks. The storm seared indelible images in the national mind as well, from families trapped on



Top left: Active and retired Washington state NALC members from Seattle Branch 79 and Tacoma Branch 130 spent a week in suburban New Orleans working on two homes for Habitat for Humanity.

Above: New Orleans streets flooded after Hurricane Katrina hit.



rooftops to the squalor of refugees packed into the Superdome.

A month later, Hurricane Rita, the fourth-most intense Atlantic hurricane ever recorded, ran up the Texas coast before slamming Louisiana, causing billions more in damage and destruction.

“Thankfully, four years later, the area is slowly getting back on its feet,” said Region 8 National Business Agent Lew Drass, who serves letter carriers in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee.

“Because it’s such a large city, much of the media and government focus was on New Orleans,” Drass said, “and certainly, it suffered billions in damage. It’s still reeling somewhat, and so is coastal Mississippi.”

People continue to trickle back, he said, and “we’ve actually seen a net gain of about 20 city carrier routes (in New Orleans) over the last couple of years.”

“Things are getting back to ‘normal,’” he said, “or at least they’re getting better.”

Monica Walker, president of the Louisiana State Association, agrees. “The French Quarter and downtown tourist areas have come back,” she said. “But the east side of New Orleans hasn’t built back up as much. They’re tearing down old apartment buildings there, and putting up condos.”

“After the hurricanes, so many people had left that the Postal Service cut back some routes,” she said. “Then,

as people moved back, routes became extremely long.” Crescent City carriers are hoping things will change for the better as the Modified Interim Alternate Route Adjustment Process (MIARAP) progresses, she said.

“It’s going to take a while—it might be 10 years or so for New Orleans to be back to where it was,” Walker said. “And there are some sections of the city that may never come back.”

MAGNOLIA STATE RENAISSANCE

People are moving into Mississippi, or returning to it, as well, said state association President Sharon Stockstill. While “you can still go places that haven’t been rebuilt and see the devastation,” she said, “almost everybody is up and running—very few are not back to normal.”

One of the biggest hold-ups now, said Stockstill, is that there are a number of NALC members still waiting for insurance settlements and state aid. “Governor (Haley) Barbour is taking the millions that were meant for disaster relief and using the money for other projects,” Stockstill said, such as repair and expansion of Gulfport’s harbor.

“The governor is just sitting on (the money) right now,” added Gulfport Branch 1374 President Greg White. “And until the state gets the insurance



Habitat for Humanity®

Habitat for Humanity is a non-profit, global organization whose mission is to eliminate substandard housing and homelessness. It invites people of all backgrounds to build houses together with families in need, through volunteer labor and donations of money and materials.

Rather than giving the dwellings away, Habitat houses are sold to families at no profit and financed with low-cost loans. In addition to a down payment and monthly

mortgage payments, homeowners invest hundreds of hours of their own “sweat equity” into building their houses as well as others’. Monthly mortgage payments are then used to build still more Habitat houses.

Habitat houses can cost from \$800 in some developing countries to an average of around \$60,000 in the United States. Mortgage lengths vary from seven to 30 years.

—Source: Habitat.org



situation straightened out, our carriers can’t get their PERF payments.”

PERF, the Postal Employees’ Relief Fund, is the disaster-relief charity operated by the USPS’ unions and management organizations that helps postal employees and retirees who are victims of natural disasters or fires. The supplemental grants range from \$1,000 to \$14,000 and are only distributed after insurance and other relief assistance has been paid. (*See postalrelief.com to find out more about PERF.*)

In terms of day-to-day deliveries, the situation is beginning to look the way it did pre-2005. For example, until about a year ago, almost all deliveries in the suburban Gulfport town of Pass Christian went to NDCBUs. “But in the last year, they’ve returned to street delivery,

although at least two routes are more than 50 miles right now,” Stockstill said.

“A lot of our hurricane damage was actually from the water that came four miles inland,” Stockstill noted. “In my own town of Picayune, people are moving there, partly because it’s farther inland and away from the coast.”

“We’re very tenacious in Mississippi,” Stockstill said, laughing as she added, “That’s just another, nicer word for ‘hard-headed.’”

Tenacious *and* dedicated, said White. “For months after the hurricanes hit, letter carriers were sometimes working 15 hours a day, six days a week,” he said. “They may have grumbled about it, but their number-one concern was getting the mail to their customers, even while they were spending late nights and days off working on getting their own homes repaired.”

“In times of disaster, one of the most reassuring signs that everything will be all right is when our customers see us back out on the street, delivering the mail,” said NALC President Fred Rolando. “While the federal government was stumbling and fumbling the relief efforts, carriers played a huge role in making sure life in the Gulf Coast returned to normal as soon as possible.”

“It’s almost there but it’s not there yet,” he said. “But I know we’ll stay on top of it until everything gets back to the way we know it should be.” ✉

One of the levees that broke, releasing flood waters into residential neighborhoods.

