

In Their Own Words

AAA Member Reflections on the 10-Year Anniversary of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

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The two weeks I spent in the rescue and relief efforts during Hurricane Rita have, by far, been the most meaningful part of my career.

“In 2005, I was working for Action Ambulance in Massachusetts, a longtime AAA member. When Katrina hit, I had a two month old and a one year old and I was reluctant to leave my wife with two infants. Then Hurricane Rita came – and we both knew I had to go. I was a Paramedic, working in both a clinical and business operations role.

Within 24 hours, the team of 10 ambulances and 30 providers from Action Ambulance, Cataldo Ambulance, Professional Ambulance and Booth Bay headed to Louisiana’s Gulf Coast Region. From Boston we stopped only once, at a camp-site in Alabama, to shower, eat and sleep for a couple hours.

When leaving Alabama we were given instructions to report to Tyler Texas. Arriving into the storm area, our fuel levels became critically low and no stations were open. From the side of the road, we could see a fuel tank in someone’s back yard. Miraculously, a kind man emerged and offered to fill our tanks. We were on our way.

Tyler, TX was hot, destitute, and houses and trees were destroyed. We went directly to a nearby school where we encountered a make shift first aide clinic, which was neither safe nor functional. But on the ride in, I noticed an abandoned hospital. I found a local deputy Sheriff and asked about the hospital; he said they evacuated and boarded it up and he did not have the jurisdiction to open the hospital for us. I asked him to contact the local mayor for me. The mayor called me and I explained we needed the hospital opened and operational, to set up a clinic. The hospital was shuttered as its employees were tending to their own emergencies. The mayor swiftly responded and gave us permission to kick the doors in and set up shop.

As the Team Lead, I wore many hats. We were not just there to help sick and injured people. On the administrative side, I worked with the Police Department, local judges and Mayor all of whom provided a great deal of support. I also served as the liaison to FEMA. On the medical front, we treated everything from pediatric emergencies, heart attacks, to strokes to snake and spider bites – and everything in

between. It was incredible—we were so overwhelmed but we had a fantastic structure in place at the hospital; everyone knew their job. And nobody slept for at least three days straight.

Our mission was to treat and transport the sick and injured. The latter was hard to do without diesel fuel. So we worked with local officials to have helicopters brought in. This is the type of problem solving we had to work through in a very short period of time. After a few days at this hospital, we were relieved by a FEMA medical task force and moved to a search and rescue site and set up another clinic.

It was amazing to work that closely with people I had just met; to form that bond and establish almost immediately a cohesive team to get these critical tasks accomplished.

I learned you can't be shy, don't just do what you are told— you have to take initiative and responsibility.

Ten years later as the CEO of an ambulance company, those days are always in the back of my mind. We always want to help, locally or nationally. If something like this happens again we are ready. We've worked hard to ensure business continuity, from extra generators that are checked monthly, to backed up files of all patient care reports, to regular evacuation drills. I'm certain my experiences from Hurricane Rita have improved my business and for that I am grateful."