

October 3-7, 2005

My partner Darryl Singleton and I made our way into lower Hancock County, MS on September 16 in support of Water Missions International, as one of several teams evaluating safe-drinking water needs. Within days this had simply turned into a water mission, and ultimately just a mission.

In an incredibly full 9 days, we pieced together a puzzle that included all the “official” relief agencies, but also involved an army of volunteers, working individually, or as organized groups. Fulfilling our original “mission”, we realized that individual well owners were left to their own limited resources to try and re-establish a water source. At first, the concern for contamination and the need for disinfection of wells seemed the most immediate need, but we began to realize a more urgent need existed.

All of the homes in Hancock County below I-10 are uninhabitable. Most that have not been completely obliterated, if they are recognizable as homes, are structurally damaged beyond repair. The few that can be restored must be cleaned of mud and debris, and gutted to the bare studs. If there is an exception to this, we did not find it. So how are people living in these areas? If they are not away with relatives or friends, who often have their own issues to deal with, or the few in shelters, they have been living in tents. Yes, weeks on end in the hot Mississippi sun in tents, taking a shower when they can at a relief center, or maybe a makeshift outdoor shower a neighbor has pieced together from pieces of plywood, the water coming from a well that has been nursed back to life for awhile.

The basic needs for existence have been met by the Red Cross, and there is enough bottled water to supply Niagra Falls. What people are desperate for is to restore bits and pieces of normalcy to their shattered lives. And the first major step toward this is a “FEMA trailer” to get them out of a tent or shelter.

Now the FEMA trailer is not as grand as I first envisioned. They are actually a hodge-podge of towable RVs, by various manufacturers. I have seen bigger and nicer campers pulled down the highway on the way to someone’s favorite camping spot. A few of the trailers are nicer than others, and it seems to be the luck-of-the-draw that determines what an individual family will get. But all that arrive are welcomed as a shelter that is vastly more suitable for living than a tent. After 18 months the occupant may purchase them for \$1500, or FEMA comes and hauls them away. Many will be needed as homes longer than that.

In order to receive a unit, you must have utility power, sewerage, and a water source. Power co-ops have done a wonderful job of coming to the area and systematically restoring power, most of which is now complete. Towns with public water supplies have been able to get them operational, often with FEMA and military assistance, and are feeding chorine for disinfection. Sewer systems are similarly being restored. Rural residents without public water either have septic tanks, or a rural sewerage system. So what is the missing piece, the need that is not being addressed by some agency or public entity? The individual well owner.

What has emerged as even more immediate than getting clearance to drink the well water, is just to have a functioning system in order to qualify for “the trailer”. Often we find residents desperately hunting for resources, racing to avoid being passed over for a trailer, sent to the bottom of the list. While there are a few good and decent plumbers working to restore services, there is also price gouging. Then of course the need to test and assure the water is safe to drink is critical, and the only assistance with this are a few places where residents can go and pick up health department sample bottles and return them and wait for some notice to eventually be sent.

This week, teams of workers arrived at the relief center in Pearlinton, MS, to begin an organized effort to address this need. The volunteers are mostly from the Charleston and Mount Pleasant water and sewer utilities. Jeff Hazlewood, a UPS pilot, is spearheading the effort. Tanya Smith, a biologist recently down from Canada is compiling data and testing wells. Cody Kelly is on loan from a utility near Atlanta. Water Missions International is organizing the work, and pulling together the resources to meet this critical need. Well Busters II (the sequel) will need a lot of volunteers and financial help for this project, and information about Water Missions International is available on the Internet, if you would like to take part.

And I just had to come back and finish some things that began on my first trip. There were contacts to strengthen, official agencies to register with, new information to discover, and new people to encounter and fall in love with. There is J.D. Bennett, the retired barge pilot that has traveled all of the 1700 miles of navigable water that feeds the Mississippi River. There is Gail LaFontaine, the widowed grandmother taking care of 2 generations of kids, whose house burned down after “surviving” Katrina. There is the elderly couple sitting

down from us at the Pearlinton food kitchen, patiently waiting for assistance with their well, oblivious that help was sitting at the same table till we struck up conversation. The list goes on and on.

The needs in Hancock County are still enormous and there is still time to volunteer for meaningful relief efforts. Some of the official efforts will be winding down, and the remaining assistance will come from grass-roots volunteerism. Thankfully, the Pearlinton relief center is still going strong, still staffed by volunteers (you can find articles on the internet alluding to its rocky beginnings). Pearlinton hopes to (and needs to) be running for the next year, and you can be part of that. Conrad needs help building 100 storage sheds to remedy the cramped storage capacity of the trailers. Talk to people in your churches and civic groups, and look for ways to participate. Charleston CPW employees did an impromptu fundraiser before my return trip, and sent nearly \$1000 worth of Wal-Mart and Lowe's cards. The recipients were overjoyed at the alternative to the Red Cross truck handing out toilet paper and brooms, a chance to go and shop, and pick out just the little things needed.

Help can be as simple as getting a small team to drive to the area, finding any of the countless needy families, and starting to clear a yard. Just having a small space clear of debris is like a refreshing cup of water. Little pieces of normalcy restored gives hope and encouragement to people living in the midst of chaos.

John K. (Jake) Earle
642 Leisure Lane, Mt. Pleasant, SC