

After Katrina

RIT alumni responded in personal ways to the devastating storm

On Aug. 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina blasted into the Gulf Coast to become the costliest and one of the deadliest natural disasters in the nation's history.

Its monstrous size inflicted devastation more than 100 miles from the center. The accompanying storm surge caused catastrophic damage along the coastlines of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. New Orleans suffered further destruction when levees gave way, allowing flooding of roughly 80 percent of the city.

Katrina caused an estimated \$115 billion in damages and claimed more than 1,800 lives.

Members of the RIT community responded in a variety of ways. Following are just a few of their stories.

Photographs and memories

Dave Ellis '98 (photo journalism) is photo assignment editor for the *Free Lance-Star* in Fredericksburg, Va. Like so many media organizations, the newspaper sent a photographer to cover the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Back in Fredericksburg, Ellis looked at the images coming back from his colleague, Rebecca Sell.

"There was one of a woman in front of her destroyed house holding a framed photograph," says Ellis. The precious family picture was ruined.

"We had the idea that as journalists, a way we could give back was to help people restore their damaged photographs," says Ellis.

After New Year's, Sell and Ellis went to Pass Christian, Miss., to begin their project. The devastation shocked him.

"To me, it didn't even seem like Ameri-



Dave Ellis '98 talks with Pass Christian resident Georgia Kuhner about her damaged photos. At right is an example of a photo before and after restoration by Operation Photo Rescue volunteers.



ca," he says.

On that trip, they stayed for a week and collected 200 photos for restoration.

They told friends about their work, and started a blog (online journal). Word began to circulate.

"We originally were going to do this on our own dime, using vacation time," says Ellis. But word got out at the *Free Lance-Star*, and the newspaper made a commitment to pay their salaries and provide supplies. Things really exploded when their project made the

"Hot News" section of the Apple Web site. Offers of help have come from all over the world. A photo lab in California donated services. The Virginia News Photographers Association donated \$3,000. Individuals volunteered to help repair the images.

Here's how Operation Photo Rescue works: Ellis, Sell and others make periodic visits to the Gulf Coast area, setting up shop in public places such as libraries. People bring in damaged photos and the volunteers make digital copies. These are e-mailed to other volunteers who restore the images digitally and e-mail them back to Ellis. Finally, new prints are made and given to the original owners.

By spring, Operation Photo Rescue had grown so much that Ellis and his colleagues decided to incorporate it as a non-profit

organization. More than 1,000 photos have been collected, and they're still coming in.

"We plan to continue the work," says Ellis. "Beyond Katrina, there will be other major disasters, even a fire down the block. We say 'Insurance doesn't restore memories, but we do.'"

Ellis emphasizes that they provide this service free of charge.

"The really big payoff is the people's reactions," says Ellis. "As people bring the photos, they tell the stories. Sometimes,

the damage is so bad there's nothing we can do, and that's hard. But people are so appreciative."

People interested in making a donation or finding out more can visit the Web site, www.operationphotorescue.com.

For the children

Katrina's devastation moved Ariya Martin '05 (master's, photography) and Tara Malik '00 (photo illustration) to action.

Last November, they cleaned out houses in New Orleans' 9th Ward as part of a 10-day effort sponsored by Code Pink, an activist organization. In March, they returned to participate in the New Orleans Camera Project, teaching photography to children. They expect to stay at least through this coming November.

"We're working in areas that had a lot of damage," says Martin. "One of the goals is to help restore social networks, to bring people together. We're trying to create a



A self-portrait by 8-year-old Raymond Robinson, a resident of New Orleans' badly damaged 9th Ward. He's one of about 20 youngsters learning photography from Ariya Martin '05 and Tara Malik '00.

new sense of community, and I think that's been really successful."

The project also gives children something constructive to do with their time – "a way for them to have fun" – when their lives have been so terribly disrupted.

The women seek out the children and families and meet wherever they can find a place – on porches, in homes. The young students tour their neighborhoods making pictures with donated cameras, primarily using film.

The work has received notice: The students had a show and sold prints at the spring New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and each student had a print accepted for the "Katrina Exposed" exhibit at the New Orleans Museum of Art.

Martin and Malik are working at a hotel in the French Quarter to support themselves while they work with the children. The two Rochester residents have put their own lives on hold to help in New Orleans.

Martin says some areas of the city have come back to life, but there are still vast areas of devastation.

"Rebuilding is a long, slow process," she says.

Donations of cameras, other equipment, supplies and funds for the Kids Camera project are welcome. For more information, go to www.kidcameraproject.org.

Shelter after the storm

John "Jack" DeLisio '05 (physician assistant) was about to start a new job when Hurricane Katrina put his plan on hold.

DeLisio, chief of the Egypt (N.Y.) Fire Department, responded to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's call for 1,000 two-person teams to help with the Katrina relief effort. He and three other members of the department received training in Atlanta and were sent to Fort Worth, Texas.

"We were part of what's called a 'community relations mission.' Our job was to help people enter the FEMA system," DeLisio explains. "Primarily, we were in a big convention center that was being used as an evacuation center."

A few weeks after he arrived, Hurricane Rita struck Texas. He worked several days helping the Beaumont (Texas) Fire Department conduct house-to-house searches.

During his 30 days in Texas, DeLisio didn't see the property damaged caused by Katrina.

"In Fort Worth, we saw the human damage," says DeLisio. "The stories the people told were just amazing. They needed help, and we tried to give it. I think Fort Worth and Dallas did a great job of helping people with the transition from shelters to more permanent housing."

DeLisio now works as a physician's assistant at Rochester General Hospital and Newark-Wayne Community Hospital. It's his second career; he retired in 2000 after working for Mobil Chemical Co. as a manufacturing manager.

A personal view

The images in the news media didn't say enough.



Dave Ellis washes a damaged photo in a bathroom sink in an effort to remove the photo from its glass frame. (Photo by Mike Morones)



"I couldn't understand what had happened," says Daniel Levin '87 (photo illustration). Levin, who for many years has operated a commercial photography business in Cleveland, is now a full-time teacher and co-coordinator of photography in the visual communication department at Cuyahoga Community College. He is also close to completing his master's of fine arts degree in visual arts at Vermont College, via distance learning.

Five weeks after Katrina, Levin traveled to Biloxi, Pass Christian, and Long Beach, Miss. "I went because I felt as helpless as everyone else, and I wanted to try to understand it through the way that I know."

Levin used a view camera to make large-format, multi-image panoramas of what he saw. "What happened in Mississippi was off-the-record-book violent," he says. "I saw amazing things."

He saw wonderful instances of people helping, like the men from a North Carolina Baptist church who cooked meals for storm victims. There were soldiers who had lost everything, but worked to help others.

He witnessed failures, like a huge pile of good, usable, donated clothing strewn on the ground and ultimately discarded because no one found a way to safely store and distribute the items.

And there were bizarre, ironic sights.

"I was on President Jefferson Davis' property, where I found his player piano, circa 1846, two hundred yards from his house and 15 feet up a live oak tree."

Levin's trip did accomplish his personal goal of better understanding the tragedy. He hopes others will learn something from his images as well. Levin's photos were exhibited in Vermont and will be in a show



"I was on President Jefferson Davis' property, where I found his player piano, circa 1846, two hundred yards from his house and 15 feet up a live oak tree, upside down."

Daniel Levin '87

at The Heights Art Collective in Cleveland in September.

"My theory is the more people know, the more they can learn," he says, "and the failures of the system won't happen again."

Beginning the rebuilding

Alan Gifford '77 (civil engineering technol-

ogy) arrived in New Orleans just days after Katrina struck.

"It was unbelievable," he says. "You remember the movie *The Day After*? It was like that."

Gifford, the first deaf graduate of RIT's civil engineering technology program, works for The Shaw Group Inc., an international engineering, construction, environ-



A ruined gas station in Pass Christian, Miss., functions as a distribution point for donated clothing. All of the people shown in this panorama by Daniel Levin '87 lost their homes.

mental and industrial services company with headquarters in Baton Rouge, La. Last Labor Day weekend, he had just completed work as the resident engineer for a \$46 million project in Massachusetts when he was dispatched to New Orleans. Gifford was responsible for compiling data on costs and procedures and submitting project documentation to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The first task was to repair water mains. "In Jefferson Parish we repaired 481 broken water mains in 17 days," he says.

Gifford relates one particular incident. "We had just fixed a water main and sewer line, so service was restored. There was a house – half was gone, with a blue tarp on the roof. An elderly lady and her sister came out and brought us food. She said 'thank you, thank you for helping.' She had tears in her eyes."

Gifford, who lives near Boston, has worked in many parts of the world. He says the devastation he saw in Louisiana was mind-boggling.

"You have to be strong mentally and physically," he says. "It was very devastating. I worked with people who lost everything, but they came to work. You have to try to put yourself in their shoes. You try to be comforting."

Gifford was in



Alan Gifford '77 in New Orleans.



A detail from a painting, 'Hurricane Category 5'; by Gene Masters Salerno '79.

Louisiana for about two months. "I was tired, exhausted. It was physically and emotionally draining. It took a month to get back on track," says Gifford, who is now working in Deer Park, Texas, on a construction project for the Army.

The art of compassion

As a resident of Florida, Gene Masters Salerno '79 (fine arts) has witnessed the terrible impact of monster storms.

His emotional response inspired a large (4x6-foot) oil painting, *Hurricane Category 5*, and also led to creation of the Gene Masters Florida Hurricane Relief Drive. For a donation of \$125 to the American Red Cross, contributors receive a 22x28-inch,

signed and numbered reproduction of the painting.

"Lots of people have gotten behind this project," says Salerno. "We've had wonderful publicity."

People who would like to participate in this unique fundraiser can send a check for \$125 made out to the American Red Cross to Gene Masters Salerno, 1260 47th Avenue NE, Naples, FL 34120.

"Anyone identifying themselves as an RIT student or alumnus can have a print for a donation of \$100," says Salerno. "Of course, they could offer more if they chose to."

Kathy Lindsley

From Katrina to RIT

In the wake of Katrina, many Gulf Coast area universities were forced to shut down for weeks or months. RIT was one of many universities around the country that offered students the opportunity to continue their studies.

A dozen of those students arrived for fall quarter 2005. Most subsequently returned to their universities as they reopened, but three decided to stay on at RIT.