

Updates from Shari Prestemon, Executive Director of Back Bay Mission.

September 30, 2005

Dear friends,

Peace to each of you, faithful friends who continue to pray for us and uplift us by your love and caring. It has now been one full month since the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina. I am awed by that realization. So much has occurred and such extremes of emotions have been felt. Is it possible that all this has been experienced in just a few weeks? Time is now measured in "before" and "after" terms. We long for the routines and certainties of life before the hurricane; we wonder still how life will ultimately unfold after the hurricane.

For many, the initial fog of shock and denial has begun to lift, replaced by another stew of anger, impatience, and anxiety. And then there is something else: sadness. There is simply too much of it now. It is etched on nearly every encounter one has here in this time of "after". There was the man who stood in a store, talking on his cell phone, who suddenly erupted into sobs. There's the cashier who told me with barely contained tears that both her children's schools were completely destroyed. There's the friend who told me she misses the solace and centering moments of what used to be her daily drive to work along the Gulf's edge. And there are far too many conspicuous absences at tables of fellowship and of work, loved ones displaced by a storm that showed far too little mercy.

The Back Bay Mission family has not been immune from all of this. In the time since my last up-date, two key program staff members have resigned, persons who lost everything to the storms and cannot fathom a return to the area. We miss them immensely. In addition, our independent building assessment conducted last week concluded that we must demolish five of our seven buildings on campus. The two workcamp dorms, the bath house, the Iroquois Avenue guest house, and the Thrift Shop building must all be taken down. The workcamp cottage has significant damage as well, and its future is also in question. Only the main office/service building is sure to remain, but it must be gutted and rebuilt from the studs out.

Yet there is good news to share, too! We are making slow but constant progress toward establishing presence again on our campus. By October 10, we should have at least one mobile office in place there, and a second will follow. Plans are underway to have a modular home in place by year's end on an adjacent property, which will house all staff and services while repairs are done to the campus's main building. We've accepted donations of two RV's that can house individual volunteers, and we've found a place to put them. And a long-term volunteer has already been identified by the Volunteer Ministries office in Cleveland; she will begin her service with us in mid-October.

We have also resumed bits and pieces of our ministry. We agreed this week to serve as the fiscal agent for the Interfaith Disaster Recovery Task Force, which will serve as a long term recovery agent in the area. We are convening other social service providers to begin assessments of what new service gaps have been created by the loss of so many agencies to the storm. And we have worked to locate all our Home At Last clients, homeless disabled

persons we had placed in permanent housing. Although several were safe and still housed, others' apartment buildings had been swept away by the storm, making them homeless once again. We will strive to find them new housing, although what little housing is left is in very high demand. Sadly, one Home At Last individual is presumed dead. We have listed him on the missing persons register, in hopes that he may still be found.

We are still struggling to figure out how we can accommodate workcamp groups in the near future, but we are working hard to solve that problem. And in the meantime, one work group has already been and gone... and accomplished incredible things! A work crew from St. John UCC in Archbold, OH took on the very nasty task of cleaning out every moldy, damp item from our main building, power washing the flowers, and ripping out every inch of drywall. Wow! Another source of inspiration: your gifts. Your financial support has begun to flow, and we have been amazed by your generosity. Individuals, congregations, denominational offices, and organizations of the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries (UCC) have dug deep and have endlessly surprised us with their gifts. Again, we are thankful beyond words for the trust you have placed in us, for the love you have showered on us.

Yes, Back Bay Mission will rebuild... our staff, our ministries, and our facilities. The future is daunting, but it is also filled with incredible opportunity for the Mission and for our community. As I rise each day I remind myself of that, and as I go to bed each night I ask God for more strength, more wisdom, more vision for the coming days. And as the tasks and conversations of each day unfold, I find myself blessed. I have quickly learned that when all else is stripped away, it is the strength of our relationships that pulls us through... with family, with friends, with all of you, and with God. The ties that bind are stronger than the hardest day. Thanks be to God!

I will continue to provide updates for as long as you want to read them. Know also that you may access a power point slide show, with pictures of our property "after" the hurricane, at www.chhsm.org/backbay. (Edit - Also download here.) Share it as you will, but know the pictures don't do justice to the extent of damage incurred. This is one case where you truly have to see it to believe it.

Our deepest thanks to each of you for all that you have done and all that you are still doing to ensure the future of Back Bay Mission. You have blessed us!

Peace,

Rev. Shari Prestemon

P.S. If you had a workcamp scheduled for 2006 and have not yet contacted staff member Don Morgan, please do so at dmorgan@datasync.com