

11:08 PM
Wednesday, September 14, 2005

Hello to all,

We're currently based in Mount Olive, Mississippi, which is just a little southwest of Hot Coffee, MS.



To get here, we drove 26 hours straight to Jackson, MS from San Diego. Along the way we stopped for lunch in Texas west of Dallas for about an hour and about 30 minutes for ice cream cones in Shreveport, LA. Otherwise, we tag teamed driving and sleeping. We needed to drive another 350 miles up to northern Alabama to pick up our friend Gary and his tractor, so after a short tour of the local equipment rental lots, we kept going. We got to Birmingham about 3AM and pulled over and slept a few hours since we didn't want to pull into Gary & Angie's house in the middle of the night. The next morning we had some breakfast and drove on in.

Most valuable things for the road trip:

- XM Radio
- Headphone jack for truck audio system

Best moment on the road trip:

- Seeing an SUV on a Dallas freeway with "New Orleans Refugee" written on the windows. When the guy caught our "Hurricane Relief" sign and our California plates he ran us down, repeatedly shouted "thank you" and blew us kisses.

After a couple of days of equipment prep, etc. we headed south to the hurricane area on Monday. We stopped here in Mt. Olive, which is about 100 miles from the Gulf of Mexico where the hurricane came ashore. Little known fact: the hurricane actually came ashore in Mississippi, not Louisiana. While New Orleans has been getting all the coverage, MS has been digging out. We're here to help with that.

We've spent the last two days on the ground in the disaster area here in Mississippi cutting trees and helping people out.

Here's what we've learned so far:

- Get yourself prepared. If something big happens in your area, you are ON YOUR OWN for at least 72 hours. The deal the feds have with local and state emergency agencies is that the feds will be there in 72 hours. So, if something really bad happens in your area on a Tuesday, you can expect the federal Calvary to come over the hill on Friday. Even if they know it is coming.

- Why? Because it takes a while to get to you. One of the freeways we drove down yesterday while scouting work is lined with huge trees that have been cut or bulldozed back off the pavement. It wouldn't have mattered what was pre-positioned outside the hurricane impact area, until some Very Big Equipment cleared that interstate nothing was getting to the people in need. Get yourself prepared and be self-sufficient.
- Bureaucracy is everywhere. We talked with a helicopter EMT who had just gotten back to his family and his tree crushed property after spending two weeks plucking people out of the impact area. He described a dispatch center where the two agencies responsible for search and rescue chopper operations sat in one large room, one agency along one wall, the other agency along the other. The two people who managed each agency had to sign off on the dispatches and other documents that allowed the choppers to fly and people to be saved. Instead of the manager signing the docs and walking across the room to the other manager to get signed, each manager routed the paperwork through their entire chain of command, all the way down one, where it was handed to the peer-peon of the other agency and then all the way back up the ladder. Meanwhile, people were dying. And this was at the local/state level. One can only imagine the turf wars and molasses slow response times at the higher levels and mega-charities.
- The Big Logos are not first on the scene. We know a guy who was down on the gulf coast on a search and rescue mission just after the hurricane came ashore. He said the first people on the ground were the Salvation Army, who had soup kitchens set up immediately. The next people, directly after, were the church disaster response groups "because they were not hampered by bureaucracy." Think before you write your checks. The Big Logo Charities spend a lot of the money you are sending them on hugely inflated salaries for top execs and tons and tons and tons of Public Relations (which buys press coverage praising them) and advertising (also praising them and glorifying their efforts). The people we are seeing down here really making a difference are not with the Big Logos. We haven't even been able to find anyone who has been helped by the Big Logos. Think before you write the check.
- The rural areas are completely forgotten. The small towns and rural people are, by and large, completely forgotten. Important people, people with influence, come from New Orleans and the big cities. Not very many people with power and influence come from Seminary, MS, which finally had a volunteer group come through yesterday and cut the trees off the houses. Even the local people forget the rural people. We heard today of an elderly man who lives on an isolated farm who spent 10 days trapped in his tree crushed house. Seems his son who lives nearby just never got around to checking on him.
- It is inconceivable how much work has been done here already, just two weeks after the storm. Having spent a couple of days cutting away downed trees, I have a small idea of how many man-hours it takes to clear a large tree. The streets of every town, village and city in this area are lined with cut trees waiting for pickup. It is mind-boggling to think of how many man-hours it took to cut and clear this much damage. And almost all of it has been done by volunteer groups who descended on this region like white on rice.
- It is also inconceivable how much damage that there is. The little town we are staying in has some damage. It is about 100 miles to the gulf from here. Today we worked in Hattiesburg, which is about 65 miles from the gulf. There is an incredible amount of damage there. Entire neighborhoods that were filled with 40-60 foot trees are leveled, with not a tree left standing and many of the houses crushed.
- Things blend together very quickly. I've already forgotten how many places we've worked and what we did at each one. I couldn't begin to tell you the number of trees we've cleared and people we've helped. And we've only been here three days and cutting for two.

Following are some scenes from the last few days:



This is John Robinson. John lives here in Mount Olive on the spot his grandmother's house stood on. John works with Mentally Disabled people at a nearby facility. He's a hard worker, and basically never calls in sick or takes much time off. Consequently, he's built up about a year in leave time. He's also built a nice little home, neat and clean and well appointed.

John has a great sense of humor, is a really good guy and helps to look after his aunt who lives next door and his mother who lives across town. John would be hard to beat as a neighbor.



This is John's house with two trees through it.



This is Gary and I removing the two trees.



This is John and his house 4 hours after we began the job with all the cut trees piled next to the road where the county will pick them up.



This is what happens when a professional organizer goes to a disaster relief zone. She gets her disaster relief supplies organized!



The hurricane blew in a species of small black bug that is not normal for this part of the country. It is their mating season, so they swarm heavily, and also mate while flying around, so of course they've been deemed "love bugs."



This is what happens when you drive through countless thousands of love bugs. They seem to be thickest around mid-morning. It takes about 20 minutes to clean your windshield.

The best method I've seen is to soak them, let them sit for a few minutes, and then scrape them off with an ice scraper. Unfortunately, there aren't many ice scrapers for sale in Mississippi in September.

All the windshield cleaner buckets at the stations reek from the decomposing love bug bodies in the sun heated water.



This afternoon we put Steph on Gary's tractor. It was a tremendous help and really speeded up this job.

L to R: Gary DuBois, our motorcycle riding friend from northern Alabama; Burt, the guy we were helping; Steph and I.

Three weeks ago, Burt was diagnosed with Parkinsons. This week he was diagnosed with malignant melanoma. We cleared a bunch of trees from his yard and about half a dozen that were blocking his driveway.

We'll spend the next week or so working in the Hattiesburg area, and then we plan to move south to Gulfport. We've gotten word that they've got enough tree work down there to keep us busy until November.

We don't know how bad it will be down there, but by the huge difference in destruction we've seen between areas 100 miles out and 65 miles out from the hurricane's landfall, we are expecting the worst considering that Gulfport is on the coast.

Thanks to all of you who are supporting us. Your thoughts and prayers are with us, are felt and are appreciated.

We know many of you are looking for ways to contribute directly down here. We are keeping our eyes open and will be posting some groups and individuals who will be specifically and significantly impacted by your help as soon as we can. When she's not driving the tractor or scouting out work for us, Steph is working with local disaster relief groups down here, so she will probably have some news in this regard soon.

I'll try to get something out when I can. We have very intermittent access to the internet.

Be well,
Doug