



In Katrina, compassion met adversity

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Editorial/Opinion

Next week will mark one year since Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast and cut a swath of destruction that was truly of biblical proportions. Together, our nation watched in helpless horror as the winds and the waters surged — killing more than 1,000 loved ones and wiping away once-vibrant communities. In essence, Katrina was an American tsunami: The devastation and despair it randomly cast throughout the Gulf Coast was painfully evocative of what we saw when we toured the Indian Ocean perimeter together in 2005.

It was typical of the American spirit that, after the skies opened up, so did the hearts of our people. Indeed, the compassion shown by citizens offered the first ray of hope after those dark skies cleared. Pledges of help and money poured in from far and wide — corporate boardrooms and classrooms, celebrities and school children, large cities and small towns, and the churches and synagogues that literally threw open their doors to shelter the homeless from every faith and strata of society.

To help channel this outpouring of goodwill, President Bush asked us to join together to raise funds to assist the recovery effort. America's response to this collaborative effort — the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund — has been overwhelming. Some 60,000 donors have given more than \$129 million to The Fund.

The outpouring

We received generous donations from such high-profile groups, companies and people as diverse as Wal-Mart, the PGA Tour, the country of Kuwait and U2. But we also received \$16 from a young man in Pine Beach, N.J., who sold baked goods at a soccer game. Three terrific kids in Brooklyn sent \$300 they raised standing on a corner to collect money from passing cars. And a T-shirt store owner in Connecticut put out a donation can in her shop and collected \$65.

Today, 12 months on, we can report that the broad diversity of those who contributed to this effort mirrors the many ways we have, in turn, put your generosity to work.

We started by giving \$40 million to funds set up by the governors of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, since they knew best what the immediate needs were. We directed \$30 million to higher education, since we felt strongly that keeping the colleges and universities open and investing in its future leaders is vital to the region's long-term recovery. We also funneled \$25 million into a fund for the region's churches, synagogues and all places of worship, since the spiritual well-being of citizens is as important as any building.

From there, we tried to identify specific needs in various communities along the coast. In New Orleans, we helped St. Thomas Health Services clinic provide badly needed medical care for the uninsured. We also partnered with the Children's Health Fund to provide mental health services for residents in southern Mississippi and Louisiana.

The Fund has helped shrimpers in Alabama get their boats back in the water and repair the sewer system in Waveland, Miss.

We are supporting Habitat for Humanity's effort to help low-income families rebuild their homes.

With your help, Operation Hope is providing economic services and financial counseling to victims.

Finally, because much of the work rebuilding the Gulf Coast will be done by young people, we supported the efforts of City Year Louisiana, a 12-month community service program, in recruiting young adults to help rebuild.

We have reached out to dozens of worthy causes. We wish we could do more, a lot more, but the fact is: You still can.

The Fund was established as a temporary program to get as much help to the most critical areas as fast as possible. While The Fund's work is nearing completion, by visiting www.bushclintonkatrinafund.org/otherorgs, you will find a list of organizations carrying on this mission. We hope those of you who have not participated in the recovery effort — and even those of you who have — will consider making a donation today.

Even today, mere words and pictures simply cannot capture the enormity of the suffering. If you have driven through New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward, if you have flown over Pass Christian, Miss., your mind numbs with disbelief.

'The best in the human spirit'

Much has been made of the two of us putting partisan politics aside to lead this effort; but, as always, the real story is how the American people have responded to this challenging time and met the worst in nature with the best in the human spirit. To be sure, there have been moments of despair in the days after the storm — and the pain of that loss is still with us — but Katrina also awoke in our people the compassion that Americans have always shown in the face of adversity.

That compassion, coupled with the courage and determination of the people at the center of the storm, is why we are confident the Gulf Coast will not only survive in the years ahead, but also thrive in the decades to come.

Former presidents George H. W. Bush and William Jefferson Clinton helped direct the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund.