

## “STORIES AND BEGINNINGS: MY SERVICE AS A DISASTER RELIEF VOLUNTEER”

Marylynn Winslow '99 BSW  
Associate Director of Admissions

RATLIFF AWARD 1999  
PETERS “GOOD NEIGHBOR” AWARD 1999



I would like to share with you two beginnings that have marked my vocational journey as a person who feels called to engage in volunteer service. I will end with the most recent, and likely the most challenging experience, which was my recent deployment by the American Red Cross to

Andalusia, Alabama. I spent ten days in Andalusia serving the needs of the victims of Hurricane Katrina as a volunteer.

### I. MY FIRST BEGINNING

In June 1989, I made the decision to leave a job as a teachers' aide in Perry Township after spending a week at the South Indiana Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. I'm confident God was calling me to turn my life in a different direction, for doors were opening. Within two weeks, I was working at a great university with a remarkable team in Admissions, and I've been blessed every day since.

After joining the staff in Admissions at the University of Indianapolis, it took me a few months to realize I wanted to continue my education, yet I didn't know what I wanted to do. Ever since I was in elementary school, I've been involved in volunteer work. Like many, I started early when I would

housesit for the neighbor's cat, rake the elderly folks' leaves, and then, in high school, go on mission trips. As an adult, I've volunteered at my local church (Southport United Methodist Church) on mission trips, helped with Christmas shopping for the needy, attended day camp as an adult volunteer, and served meals at Fletcher Place Community Center, one of the urban ministries of the United Methodist Church. One of my most enjoyable volunteer commitments at the local church was to serve as a coordinator for my church involvement with the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Like so many people, the list goes on and on.

So, I thought about it, and decided I would become a social worker. Later, I could retire and be a really good volunteer!

### II. MY SECOND BEGINNING

In April 1998, almost ten years after I started my Social Work degree, I was required to complete a senior practicum here at the University of Indianapolis. I began my work with the American Red Cross in Disaster Services. This was my "second beginning." I remember talking with Social Work Professor Toni Peabody and eliminating ideas that didn't appeal to me. I think I said something like, "I want to work with people in crisis." I thought about hospital emergency room work, working with a police or fire department, and then she and I talked about the Red Cross. I made the first contact and then we met with my soon-to-be supervisor, and the rest just fell into place.



The job of the American Red Cross is to provide basic emergency services such as food, clothing, and shelter in times of disaster. Every employee and volunteer is trained exactly the same way. We all use the exact same forms, and, believe me, there are *many* forms! In 1998, I took every class that was available to me. This prepared me to respond to local emergencies. I then took classes that prepared me to respond to national disasters, such as the Oklahoma/Kansas City tornados in the spring of 1999, and most recently, Hurricane Katrina.

What's utterly amazing about the Red Cross is that 99% of the people who respond to these national disasters are people like you and me, volunteers gainfully employed or retired in cities all around the world who have participated in the exact same training. We respond as strangers to one another, yet, after a day or two, we're a cohesive unit ready to respond to the needs of people whose lives have been disrupted by a natural disaster. From what I've seen, peoples' lives are not destroyed by natural disaster—they are only disrupted. When the people recover, they are often stronger than ever before, and the volunteers who help them through the disaster are far stronger and more humbled.

Having said all that, I want to talk more specifically about my time in Andalusia, Alabama, in early September 2005. The University granted me administrative leave, for which I'm grateful. More importantly, I'm extremely grateful to my team in Admissions who took on more work while I was gone. I'm hopeful that others, maybe you, will decide that it's time for you to get prepared to go out and help. The University motto is "Education for Service," and I know of no better way to honor the University, my education, and my Lord than to volunteer—I choose to volunteer with the Red Cross.

### III. STORIES OF POST-HURRICANE KATRINA RELIEF WORK IN ANDALUSIA, ALABAMA

I knew I wanted to go to the South, but I felt I couldn't leave my coworkers for 21 days at one of the busiest times of the year. I simply wished I was retired so I could go, just like I did when the terrorists of 9/11 hit. What I didn't know initially, was that volunteers were being asked to respond for 10 days instead of 21. The disaster was of such magnitude that the Red Cross leaders knew they would need every available volunteer.

So I packed my bags, called the airlines to see how many pieces of luggage I could take, and then unpacked my bags. Not only did we have to take clothing for 10 days but we had to take bedding, and it was recommended we take an air mattress. There was no way I could pack all my items and the air mattress in the two pieces of luggage I was allowed, so the air mattress stayed behind, as did the boots. I left Indianapolis at 7 a.m. on Saturday, September 2, all by myself. When I changed planes in Charleston, I met about 20 other Red Cross workers, and we all flew together to Montgomery, Alabama. The variety of backgrounds we came from was diverse: one volunteer was a nurse, one a small business owner, another a retired member of the U.S. Air Force, and the list went on and on. I was from Indiana, the business owner from New Hampshire, the Air Force retiree from Connecticut and the nurse from Michigan. We came from very different backgrounds, much like the people we were going to serve.

Some of the most frustrating times of deployment are during the first days. Most of us scramble to clear our desks and calendars of work and appointments and hurry to pack our bags and pay the bills that will be due before we return, eager to begin our work as Red Cross Volunteers. Once we arrived at the staging center, it seemed like everything quickly came to—well I won't say a halt—but it's the perfect example of hurry-up and wait! You check in and then wait for orientation. After orientation you turn in your updated health information, get your expense voucher validated, and move to your particular function headquarters.

**Getting My Assignment:** I might need to paint a better picture for you in order for you to understand what it looks like when you arrive at headquarters. On Monday, August 29, the hurricane hit. At that time, there was no headquarters. I arrived on September 3, five days after Katrina made landfall. The Red Cross officials had located and rented an abandoned K-Mart warehouse, moved in tables and chairs, restored electricity, and purchased paper, sticky notes, paperclips, fax machines, and copiers (actually, only one copier). So, I looked at the hurriedly prepared poster board signs and found my specialty or function: "family services."



There were tables and chairs neatly arranged and enough sticky notes on the wall to wallpaper a small bathroom! The sticky notes had the names of each family service tech and supervisor who had reported for duty. On one poster board, the location Biloxi was written in bold letters. Likewise, there was a poster board for “Richmond,” one for “Stevensonville,” and on and on. On tables were huge maps of Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi, with more sticky notes identifying the location of the corresponding names of the cities on the wall. Little by little, the names of the techs and supervisors would be placed under one of the cities.

For the longest time, my name never moved to a spot under a city. I talked with the family services coordinator and she described the different locations. I told her I was prepared to sleep on the floor. I had purchased boots when I arrived. I had six pair of heavy socks, bug spray, band aids, and water. I was prepared for **and wanted** the worst. She cautioned me that Biloxi was definitely a hardship location and we would be sleeping in a staff shelter with little or no privacy, eating MRE meals if we were lucky, (or sea rations if we weren't so lucky) and there would likely be no electricity. I told her I was ready (and inwardly felt proud of myself for thinking I could gut it out for the next 10 days), so my name was moved to Biloxi. I was told to report back to the headquarters at 8 a.m. on Sunday and get a good night's sleep at the hotel because it would be the last bed I would see for the next 10 days.

When I returned to headquarters the next morning, nothing had changed. It was still a hurry-up and wait game, so I busied myself with whatever needed to be done. I ended up making photocopies. Here's where some of my most basic social work skills came into play. I looked at a problem and searched for a reasonable solution. There was no way I could make 1,000 copies of my document while people waited—some impatiently—to make one or two copies on the one copy machine we had. It was Sunday morning, so I sought out a local church and asked if they would be willing to let me make 1,000 copies of a document if I supplied the paper. They were more than willing and even offered me breakfast. The folks were so eager to be able to help, even if it was only providing a copy machine.

When I returned from my important copy job, a new location had been placed on the board, Andalusia, Alabama. We all immediately went to the map to find out where Andalusia was in Alabama. It was about three inches south and one inch east of Montgomery. I took a five-minute break and when I returned, my name and a supervisor's name were under Andalusia, and someone was calling my name. I answered and was whisked away to one of the big bosses in another location. A gentleman named Jim from New York asked my soon-to-be new friend and boss, Yvonne, and I if we thought we could go to a local chapter in Andalusia and assist a new chapter director and a group of volunteers in setting up a service center. I immediately mentioned that I

was scheduled to go to Biloxi and really wanted to go there (remember, I was ready to face the trials and tribulations of the assignment, and was secretly looking forward to the challenge). Jim had something else in mind for me, and off Yvonne and I went. Well, that is after we arranged for a car, cell phone, all the gazillions of forms we needed, cash cards, and, much to my disappointment, our hotel assignment. I quickly unloaded my six pair of heavy duty socks and my new boots as I wouldn't need them in Andalusia.

**First Story of What I Encountered:** Most of the people we saw in our service center were really the more fortunate. Most of them had evacuated before the storm hit and had relocated to family or friends in Andalusia. My first client was a gentleman in his early eighties. When I began our interview, I asked him for his driver's license. He pulled out his well-worn billfold and searched through stacks of cards and documents looking for his license. His hands were trembling, his breathing labored, and it was obvious he was upset at not being able to find what he was looking for. I encouraged him to take his time, which he did, and finally found his license. I asked him a few questions and he apologized for not being able to hear me very well. You see, he wore hearing aids, and one had been left behind or lost when he evacuated to come and stay with his niece. We were nearing completion of our interview when I presented the final question we were required to ask, "What are your recovery plans?" He looked at me, tears forming in his tired eyes, and said, in a most sincere and honest voice, "I have no idea what I'm going to do," and he didn't. He was going to have to take one day at a time for now and plan for the future another day.

**Another Story of What I Encountered:** The clients who were probably my most affluent were an optometrist and his wife, who also worked as his office manager. As you might expect, they were middle- to upper-class folks, but their problem was unique in that they didn't believe in credit, so they didn't carry credit cards with them. They literally had the shirts on their backs and the little money they had left in their wallets. Remember, many of the people thought they were going to be gone for 24 hours, not weeks or months. Sadly for this couple, their bank was a local bank, which, in the client's words, "blew away . . . along with my home, my office, and the homes of my patients." I apologized that the best I could offer them was a voucher for a local Wal-Mart, yet they were grateful. Before he left, he said, "This is really hard for me. I'm used to being the one who sponsors the Little League team so they can have uniforms. I'm the one who puts dollar bills instead of change into the red kettles at Christmas. I'm not used to accepting charity. I'm used to giving to charities."

**Last Story of What I Encountered:** My list of stories could go on and on to include teachers, fishermen, military personnel, college students, and the elderly. However, I'll end this story with—in my opinion—the sweetest story of survival.

An older gentleman in his early eighties told his story of evacuating his home. It was only a one-story home, and he went to his friend's home that was a two-story home. As the waters began to rise, everyone in the house went to the second floor. The waters kept rising and eventually all nine people had to be evacuated by boat from the second story window. Once the water receded, the gentleman returned to his home only to find it had flooded and everything was dirty and wet. The furniture and appliances were strewn all through the house. He was determined to stay in his home to protect it from looting, so for two nights he slept on the refrigerator that had landed on its side. When I asked if he had been really uncomfortable, he said it wasn't too bad, and at least it was dry! (I guess you have to look for the blessings when you're in the eye of a disaster.) Before he left, I asked him if he had fought in any war and he said he had. I asked him which was more difficult to survive, the war or the hurricane, and he said the hurricane was worse because you didn't have your buddies there to protect your back.

Disaster has never touched my life. Hardships have seldom come my way. A few occasional disruptions caused by the illness of a loved one or my own personal illness have slowed me down a bit. However, the victims of Hurricane Katrina know what disaster is. They know "Mother Nature" is fierce and shows no partiality.

### III. APPROACHING ANOTHER BEGINNING

Lord, where are you calling me now?

Beginnings. For many, I suppose, a new beginning is a welcome relief or an exciting adventure; to others, a time of fear and trepidation. It's with mixed emotions that I think of when and where the Lord will call me next, for it will likely involve a third new beginning. In the secular sense, I think early retirement is calling my name. In reality, God may be calling me to another ministry. I'm praying, waiting, listening, and preparing myself for a new assignment. Only God knows what that will be, and this humble servant needs to be ready.

## INDEX OF PHOTOGRAPHS: IDENTIFICATIONS & PERMISSIONS

---

### *Marylynne Winslow '99*

- A (p. 83) Marylynne Winslow. University photograph used with permission of the Publications office.
- B (p. 84) Marylynne Winslow with other Red Cross volunteers in front of truck with Red Cross emblem. Personal photograph provided by Marylynne Winslow and used with her permission.
- C (p. 85) Marylynne Winslow holding small child. Photograph provided by the Publications office at the University of Indianapolis used with permission.