

## **Chapter 7**

### **The sheltered life**

Today is September 5. It is Labor Day. It is the day we begin working in the Monroe Civic Center. It is a stadium, a large sports arena capable of holding thousands of fans. Again we pass through the military check point. Again the National Guard waves us through. We enter the building and sign in. We are given white wrist bands. Volunteers wear white bands, resident evacuees wear red bands. I suddenly think about prison. The subtle bands distinguish us.

I am to work in the mental health unit. Part of my job will be to diffuse potential violence, part will be to assess for serious mental illness, for those who might need refills for medication etc. Most of the time it will be to console, to comfort, to help find resources, to validate, to help reassure people and to find a sense of hope. Most of the time people only need to be reassured that they are not crazy and but rather that this is a crazy making time and crazy making situation.

Though the residents can leave any time they want to, they have no where to go. They know it and we know it. In a sense they really are prisoners of this current event. They are innocent victims of this disaster. The residents have done nothing wrong, yet their power has been stripped from them. They do not have money; they do not have much choice. I can leave at any time.

No matter how many hugs I can give, how much listening I can do, how much empathy I can express, no matter how much is provided in food and clothing, no matter how much I can try to engage residents, they know they cannot leave. There are currents of resentment and anger from a few of the residents toward me as I walk the halls saying hello. This a clear culture of those who have and those who don't. Sadly, for the most part, the residents are black and most of the volunteers are Caucasian. It has the appearance and is reminiscent of a racial divide again.

The National Guard is in every corridor. I know the guards are here for safety. They will keep the drugs, the alcohol and the violence out. I am glad they are there here but it is clear the guards are here to watch the residents and not to watch the staff or the volunteers. There is an underlying presumption and aura here that the victims of this disaster bear watching. It might be no different having police patrol the streets in any large city but somehow this presents a different dynamic. I wonder what it would be like to live under constant surveillance.

I am surprised there is so little anger expressed. Perhaps this is because it has been so short a time since the hurricane happened. It has been such a short time since the shelter has been established here. Perhaps people are too intimidated to express their fear, their anxiety and their rage. Perhaps some of them are still numb. Still there are signs of simmering resentment. There are eyes which won't look at me. They continue talking

to each other and ignoring me when I ask how things are, when I say hello. It is subtle, but it is clear.

I am excited to be here. I'm eager to meet the people, to hear the stories, to be of comfort. I'm not sure if there will be violence or if I can defuse the anger but I'm eager to try. Perhaps my exuberance is annoying to some who are saddened and depressed over their losses. I try to monitor it.

Sue and I have been assigned to a supervisor from national headquarters. His name is Sheldon. He has a Ph.D. in psychology. What were the chances that I would come to a southern state which is deeply immersed in Baptist, Methodist and Christian faith to find a Jewish supervisor? Of the thousands of people in Texas and Louisiana whom I met, I never knowingly meet any person who was Jewish. Somehow it did not matter. I never felt more at home. At home soon upon meeting new people the conversation inevitably turns to what your occupation is, where you live, how many children you have, a kind of social rating system often ensues. While here I rarely found that to occur or to be of any importance. Titles, occupations, income levels may have been of some interest but they were clearly unimportant.

Sheldon is from California. He is retired and has vast experience. Sheldon has a beard and a mustache and reminds me of Freud. One of the volunteers has already affectionately dubbed him Siggy. Though Sheldon is technically our supervisor and he is

from national headquarters, he quickly tells us we are to report to Debbie and follow what she says. Debbie is the local volunteer and she has been in charge of setting up the mental health unit at Civic Center from the beginning. Sheldon takes a background role. He has determined that Debbie is extraordinarily capable. She lives in the community, knows the people and the resources. Sheldon is not on a power trip to run the show. He already has the experience and confidence to know his abilities. He does not have to prove himself to anyone. He is not dependent upon anyone reporting to him. I admire him and determine he is very wise. There are too many other agencies which do not work well together because of power struggles. Our mental health unit will all work well together this week.

I am not sure what we will find. Will there be a lot of anger, fear, or violence? There are so many strangers living in tight quarters, having to share bathrooms, meals, having to wear old donated clothing from other people, having to use blankets, sheets once belonging to others, sleeping on narrow cots. There are so many unknowns. There is absolutely no privacy. There are no newspapers and TV is very limited. A few people have brought radios or tiny portable TV's which they keep plugged in. They usually sit off in some corner where they can be alone. There is some news on a big screen in one room and one or two other small TV's.

In general it is good not to traumatize children by showing images of destruction over and over again. It is a hard balance to play between allowing people the right to see and hear news and wanting to protect the young children from these continual scenes. The

event happened once and the constant projections for weeks on the screens make it appear to be ongoing. The images themselves are traumatizing. It is hard for the adults to find a way watch TV by themselves and have someone else be with their children to protect them from the ongoing agonizing images.

There are so many emotional tolls. Have family members and friends survived, will people be able to go back home, will they have jobs, will there be school? I wonder how Steve and I would fare if he lost his business, if I lost my job, if we did not know if David and Michelle were alive, if we had no idea if there would be money to start again. How long would it be until I could use a bathroom in private, eat foods I liked? What would it be like to have no control over my life? What would it be like to have guards constantly walking around every part of the building? What would it be like to see armed guards where I slept, ate, used the bathroom, and went out side for fresh air? What would it be like to not know when this would end? I am pleased to find there is generally a sense of quiet and calm.

Susan and I start with a tour of the facility. We don't know exactly how many people are here today. There is no exact record. Residents leave and do not always tell anyone they are leaving. There is not a good computerized system for entering data with who has checked in, where they are from, how many people are in their family etc. It all appears to be done by hand. This is still chaos we are dealing with. This is not a corporate setting with a sense of permanence. There is one large room to house all the departments.

There are 6 foot knock down tables, folding chairs, computers, phones, and faxes in one room. There are no offices. Staff is doing the best they can. We are all volunteers and we change every few days. Training and retraining are constant. Supervisors change, volunteers change, residents change. It is easy to criticize and become frustrated. It is hard for those outside the system to see the difficulties faced and the dedication so many volunteers are demonstrating.

We start by seeing the main arena in the stadium. There are cots all over the place. They are lined up in rows down the center. They are lined up against all the edges of the arena. There is absolutely no privacy. The stadium is said to have housed somewhere between 800 to 1,200 residents last week. There are other large rooms off the main corridor. Some are for families, some for couples. They are a little more private but still have about 50 or so people in each room. The stadium has many bathrooms which normally are used for fans attending sporting events. Again there is no privacy.

There are huge gallon jugs of blue disinfectant hand wash at the sinks in the bathrooms. There are large hand written notes pasted on the mirrors and walls notes urging everyone to wash using the disinfectant. There are two nursing stations, and a pharmacy which dispenses all prescribed medications free of charge beginning at 9:30 every AM. It is staffed by and has been provided by Wal-Mart. For all my critical prior critical comments, there also need to be kudos' extended to Wal-Mart for their effort to extend help to the community. It is heartwarming to see this expression of care. Indeed they

deserve recognition for the things they do which are right. Residents begin lining up at 9 AM to fill prescriptions.

Medical doctors are housed in two large mobile units in the parking lot where they can examine patients in private. Guards are always stationed near the medical and nursing stations. There is a sense of calm and general patience as people wait for medical care. It is wonderful to know they do not have to be bussed anywhere, they do not have long waits for care, and prescriptions are filled quickly. It is staffed by volunteer MD's and RN's. People seem genuinely pleased with the care they are given. It is respectful. I feel reassured by the guard's presence and begin to wonder what the cost of providing military presence is. I wonder how long it will be before this becomes a political and economic issue.

There is a table where residents drop off their laundry and it is returned to them clean the next day. I am amazed at this detail and had never thought of how this basic task, nor how it would get done. For a moment I toy with the idea of asking them to do my laundry too. I decide better of this. The volunteers did not come here to do my laundry. By the end of the week I'm down to nothing clean and use the sink to wash some underwear.

There are local barbers who have set up chairs lining the main halls. They give free haircuts and mustache trims. There is a delightful sense of joviality. There is the warm banter associated with barber shops between those local barbers volunteering their services and the residents. It is a welcome bit of respite from the process of trying to find loved ones and find a new direction in life. They are able to laugh with me as I comment on the trims being provided. How about a little more off the side I ask. The men laugh and know I know nothing about style. I look like a \*schlep. At some point I lost my comb. The fine tooth combs provided at the shelter do not work on my thick hair. One day I resort to using a plastic fork to comb my hair after a shower. At some point I lose my elastic hair band and resort to tying my hair back with a latex glove. I wonder if I can turn this into a new fashion statement once I get home. Hmm...could I become a trend setter, a fashion designer???? . Again I toy with asking them to cut my hair too. Again I think better of this. The local barbers are not volunteering their time to style my hair.

I want so much to take photos. They would be priceless. I want so much to be able to record the row of chairs lining the hall with men sitting there having their hair cut. I want to take close ups to show the faces of the barbers who are giving of their time and helping boost moral with this familiar barbershop ritual. This moment in time makes me think of what it might feel like to be in an old time small town community with men sitting around sharing stories and laughs.

\*Schlep is a Jewish term for unkempt, unruly, sloppy appearing individual.



I want photos of the mothers and grandmothers combing their daughter's and granddaughter's hair, braiding them while they are putting colorful plastic balls in their hair.

I want to take a photo of the young tall thin father who looks barely 20 years old; as he carries his new 1 month old baby tenderly in his arms so that his young wife can get some rest. He cuddles and nurtures and I comment on the warm affectionate and giving manner he shows with his new child. Despite all the fears and doubts of the future, despite the intimidating models all around him, despite all of his young male cousins jostling each other, he knows his role in life at this point and tries not to be intimidated. His cousins strut their bodies, they flex their biceps, they try to demonstrate power and attract young women. These young adolescent males are going through mating rituals attempting to look tough and macho. Despite all this going on and the lack of recognition he gets from his family for his role in caretaking, this young father takes this time and uses his energy to show quiet, mild and gentle loving care to his young daughter.

I want photos of the grandmother who is surrounded by a dozen grandchildren and her grown children. She is so cheerful. She is wearing a bright pink \*muumuu. She lets me hold the newest infant in her family. The baby is her latest grandchild, barely two months old. This grandmother has lost all her possessions and I ask her how she is getting through this. She says she cannot understand why others are so angry.

\*Muumuu, loose dress with no waist, flows easily over every figure

“We have food, all we want, we have clothes what do these people expect”? She asks. She is cleaning the table after she has eaten. She is very much overweight, has diabetes, and has trouble walking. Her smile is so genuine and she is such a joy to engage with. “How do you get through this time”? I ask. “I have Jesus” she says, “I know he will look after me.”

I know and respect the importance of the right to privacy and confidentiality for those who enter the shelter. Photos are not allowed inside the shelter. I will try to be content with a written memory, but there is such a yearning to capture these images on film. I want to be able to have them so as to never forget. Instead I decide to take photos of the volunteers with their permission. Everyone is delighted, the military pose, the police woman poses, the nurses are engaging and pose. Other volunteers smile. In general they all want their photos taken. They ask for copies to be sent and hand me their e-mail addresses. Only one volunteer, a man about 70 years old who works in the staff break room keeping the snacks organized is irate. He says we are not to take photos. I think he will report me. I tell my supervisor who humors me and says that guy is probably wanted in at least 4 states.

At the main entrance there are many computers. They are used for locating missing persons, attempting to get help registering with FEMA etc. This area is always completely filled. Many people do not know how to use a computer and there are Red Cross volunteers who sit with them to help. There are phones where free calls may be made. These too are always full. Probably the most important thing provided here was

food. There was such an abundance of food provided 24 hours a day. In the mornings there were all kinds of juices, milk, cereals, breads muffins and fruit. There was never a limit to the amount of snacks one could take. Only occasionally did I see children take two pop tarts or suckers at one time. In general there was great comfort in knowing there would be sufficient food at all times. This provided assurance regarding the future. For someone who has lost everything to now know they could be provided this most basic need in whatever quantity they wanted, at whatever time they wanted, the value was enormous. It was a starting point to knowing that there was hope and things would get better. There was a huge array of pop tarts, cinnamon, apple, strawberry, blue berry, lollipops, chips, macaroni and cheese, tacos and cheese, top ramen soups, candy bars. All kinds of junk foods were there.

Of course coming from northern California with a background in teaching nutrition, I did think about the overabundance of sugar and fat being provided. I carried some relatively healthy cereal bars brought from home in my jacket pocket to take to children while I wandered the halls. Occasionally one would be taken by a child and tasted. It was always given back to me. Sometimes a child would take a bite before giving it back, other times it was just refused. Of all the times I tried to give a child a cereal bar I cannot remember even one which was eaten. It was clearly an indication of how many highly sugared foods had been in their diets all these years. The cereal bars simply were not sweet enough to appeal to the children. Nor did they have colorful cartoon characters on the packages. They simply did not have appeal in this market. Adults sometimes took one but generally only if they had nothing else to eat as when they had first driven up from

outside the shelter and had no food. I reminded myself that this was not the best or only time to develop good nutritional education. It was a time to comfort by providing familiarity. It was again a demonstration that comfort foods are those which are high in carbohydrates, sugars and fats, those that take little effort or time to chew or digest, those that soothe and fill tummies quickly and cheaply. I worried about the habits of poor nutrition being encouraged again. I console myself by deciding that not everything can be addressed in the midst of chaos. The priority is to feed, to sustain life. The fact that there is choice and abundance is a bonus. Nutrition education will wait. The rate of diabetes is so high in this part of the country. Several of the local registered nurses working here indicated the numbers were in excess of 50% in this part of the country. This was the time for sustaining life, for comforting, not for educating and still I was going to try. Steve would have been in heaven here. He would not have to tolerate my tofu burgers, home grown fresh tomatoes and organic non fat hormone free yogurt.

Another of the many wonderful things happening here has been the huge outpouring of the community in their provision of food for the volunteers. Some was provided by the Red Cross. By far the donations from the community were the most appreciated for the local variety and taste. There were so many daily deliveries of food from restaurants, businesses and individuals for Red Cross volunteers, for lunch, for snacks, for dinner. Platters of sandwiches, tin foil pans of spaghetti, salads, donuts, cookies, brownies breads, etc. arrived daily. Most often there was no way to know who provided the food. It was not labeled, there were often no business cards or flyers. It was an unselfish giving

with rarely a thought of getting recognition for their gestures. The food just kept coming and was so welcome. I remain so touched by the generosity of this community in Monroe. On one morning a well dressed woman came to the staff desk with two huge platters of freshly baked brownies. She apologized and said she could not stay. She was on her way to court. She was a local resident, an attorney on her way to court that morning. Still she found time for this gesture.

Still another wonderful addition was the toys which were donated. Individuals and companies sent toys, books, puzzles, bubbles, crayons, coloring books, plastic toy cars, dolls, stuffed animals, balls, larger plastic toy trucks to ride on etc. In one section off the main lobby, a room was set up to serve as a toy store. It had those Dutch double doors which open on the top and bottom with a counter in the middle and children of all ages could come there anytime during the day and get whatever they wanted. They learned that they could each have things for themselves and that some things had to be shared. There was an abundance of toys. Again this was a beginning message which indicated there will be enough for you, there will be a future, there is time for fun, and the world will be ok. In the halls there were drawings, cards and letters the children had made. It was a mini art gallery lining the walls in the main hall. It was a recognition that their work was worthy of display.

On this Labor Day suddenly there was a loud sound of music in front of the Civic Center. A high school band had come to play. It was delightful. Some of the residents came out to hear the music and some of the young children went outside and spontaneously began

to dance. Again this was once more a reminder that there would be fun again and that high school students had a part in sharing their time to provide some cheer. It was as important for the local students from the town high school, those who had not suffered the losses personally to learn and feel the value of sharing as it was for those from New Orleans who experienced the losses. A lesson on demonstrating compassion was had. Cheers to the school and its staff for taking the role in educating beyond the classroom curriculum.

### **A) Work the Crowd**

I decide it would be best to follow Sheldon around the facility to get a better idea of how he works. This is my first major national disaster assignment and I'm eager to learn from a professional who has done this before. I follow him into the main arena. This is the stadium playing field. It is where star athletes play and now hundreds of cots fill the room. I wonder if any of these children will one day be athletes and play in this center. Will it evoke memories of this time?

It is early morning. Most of the cots are empty and residents are in all parts of the stadium. Sheldon walks up and down the rows. He stops at one where there is a young man in his mid 20's. Sheldon kneels down and positions himself to the side of the cot to and begins a conversation. He is lower than the young man. This position is some times referred to as the one down position. It is a less threatening physical position to be in and works extraordinarily well in this setting. It is one which