

# **Rita forced Katrina victims and volunteers on second exodus to sanctuary in Tyler**

September 27, 2005

Posted: 9/27/05

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**By John Hall**

*Texas Baptist Communications*

TYLER—Some Texans who volunteered in shelters for Hurricane Katrina evacuees talked about how they could be displaced themselves one day.

Within two weeks, that day arrived.

More than 2.5 million people evacuated the upper Texas Gulf Coast as Hurricane Rita threatened, and many found shelter in churches throughout East and Central Texas.

Bobby Vincente of Port Neches, who worked in a shelter in southeast Texas following Katrina, couldn't help but think it's better being a volunteer than an evacuee.

He and his wife found themselves in both roles—guests and volunteer workers—at the First Baptist Church in Tyler shelter.

The Vincentes would have preferred to stay in a hotel, but like many others, they found housing outside of shelters in short supply. They discovered no vacancies between the Gulf Coast and Austin. Traveling from Houston, they found no hotels south of the Oklahoma state line.

The Vincentes—who traveled with their two grandchildren—gave their time, helping serve more than 200 other people who took the same journey as them, following a government call for coastal evacuation.

“The shoe was on the other foot so to speak a few weeks back,” Vincente said. “Now we’re the evacuees.”

Joseph Henry’s story mirrors the Vincentes. He led children’s activities at a shelter for Katrina victims. After evacuating, the Bridge City resident found himself staying with his in-laws in Tyler. He also put his skills to work leading children’s activities at First Baptist Church in Tyler.

“I do this to keep my mind off it,” he said. “If I don’t, I’m going to be the basket case with the high blood pressure—worrying, crying and end up in the hospital. I can’t afford that. I’ve got kids to raise.”

Uncertainty surrounds his life outside the shelter. He may not go home for another week. When he arrives, he does not know what he will find.

“I don’t know what I’m going to come home to,” he said. “I’m hoping ... I can salvage something, but I’m preparing for the worst. It’s very, very stressful deep down inside. But right now, I can’t show that. I’ve got a mission to do.”

Robert Bardin, minister of education at First Baptist Church in Tyler, said his church wants to help evacuees in any way possible. If it helps them to serve, he helps make that happen. The congregation wants to be the presence of Christ in these people’s lives, he said.

“I think its all part of being a Christian. I think this is exactly what Christ has called us to do—to help those in need with whatever resources we have.”

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