

Couple left family, friends to run volunteer base in Gulfport

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The North Carolina Baptist Men's disaster-relief team has centralized operations in the Gulfport National Guard Armory with plans to build 600 homes.

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Associated Baptist Press

GULFPORT, Miss. (ABP)—It would take an act of God for most people to quit their jobs, move away from friends and family and commit to living for two years in a camper in Katrina-ravaged Gulfport, Miss.

Martha and Eddie Williams were no different, but they chose to respond to that act of God with cheerful hearts. Along with four other couples, the Williamses, who enjoyed a “comfortable, normal” life in North Carolina, moved to Gulfport March 1 to oversee Hurricane Katrina relief and construction operations for two years.

Although the Williamses had considered eventually working in missions in some capacity, they had planned to wait until after they retired. God, apparently, had other plans.

“We were just being obedient to the Lord,” Eddie Williams said. “We didn’t come for any honor, praise or glory. We came to help. We just wanted to be obedient.”

He and his wife supervise operations at the Gulfport National Guard Armory, the place where the North Carolina Baptist Men’s disaster-relief team has centralized operations to build 600 homes in the next two years. On loan from the city of Gulfport, the armory provides a place where the Williamses and a staff of 10 can house, feed and coordinate construction jobs for more than 400 volunteers at one time.

The Williamses first got permission to use the armory when, in providing as many as 13,000 meals a day to people displaced by the hurricane, they outgrew Pass Road Baptist Church. Once the group moved in to the armory, they completely renovated it as a functioning base camp, adding an industrial kitchen, a prayer garden and other structural renovations.

Improvement material, meals and supplies are funded completely by grants and donations from Baptists and other religious organizations, as well as the city of Gulfport. After the Baptist Men leave, the armory and its improvements will go back to the city as a “donation” from the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

Until then, the Williamses and armory staff have their work cut out for

them. So far, they've served more than 435,105 meals, completed more than 2,500 home-recovery jobs and provided emergency childcare for 480 children. They also have built more than 250 homes toward their goal. The work was done by volunteers from different denominations staying at the armory and in surrounding churches—nearly 1,000 people in the peak week.

“Volunteers just fall in love with the people here,” Eddie Williams said. “Word is continuing to spread. They just keep coming. We’re averaging over 300 people here a day.”

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More than 14,000 volunteers have come from almost every state since Sept. 5, 2005, Williams said. Most come for a week, live in mobile homes

lined with bunk beds and work long days to provide meals, house restoration and home rebuilding.

It hasn't all been easy, Martha Williams said. She "wasn't ready" for the devastation that would face them in Gulfport—her husband compared it to his work in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami—and leaving family back in North Carolina proved difficult at first. The couple attended Liberty Hill Baptist Church in Spruce Pine, N.C.

"The hardest thing was coming to a place of peace" about the move, she said. "I had to leave a job I loved, ... but each of our children was extremely supportive."

And seeing displaced people learn about Jesus' love through the construction work has made it all worthwhile, she said, adding people have told her they had no hope until they saw the yellow shirts and hats of the volunteers.

"We've had 252 salvations from homeowners," she said. "That's just through being a friend. We're not going out and evangelizing. We're just meeting a physical need, and it turns into meeting a spiritual need."

Eddie Williams agreed, noting the mayor and city officials became supportive after they saw the good accomplished through the North Carolina Baptists. In his view, despite reports of more than 27,000 families in the Gulfport area permanently displaced due to the hurricane, the work done already has produced positive energy for the community.

"I think the city is encouraged with the help," he said. "They had no idea they'd have so much help from so many places. The whole city really is encouraged. They've got a lot of fight in them."

Now, the Williamses are focusing on a long-term push for the next year. Along with Gary and Edith Holland, Elmer and Barbara Farlow, and J. E.

and Betsy Skinner, they work 15- to 16-hour days and have returned to North Carolina only for short weekend stints. Eddie Williams is trying to form a schedule so that each couple can return home for “a week every 60 days or so.”

Joyce Thrift is one of the relief helpers. She initially came to Gulfport planning to stay for a week. But when she returned to North Carolina and started missing her work down south, she decided to move there for a more permanent term.

“It’s God’s work. It’s such a blessing to see him working,” Thrift said. “If you stay home, you’re missing so much. You’re missing seeing the miracles that God does. There are miracles every day.”

Eddie and Martha Williams continue to rely on those miracles. Martha Williams said she often spends time praying in the prayer garden, and her biggest area of concern is “for the citizens.” Many of them face a gamut of emotions daily, she said, and deal with cycles of depression, frustration and anxiety.

“If we had a general prayer for everybody, it would be that they’d be encouraged and not give up,” Eddie Williams said. “Pray that they’d not rely on mankind but rely on the Lord. He’ll meet their needs.”

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