

Teens from FBC Wolfforth help Buckner get facilities back to normal

September 5, 2006

Posted: 9/05/06



Relocating school supplies, desks and books was a daunting task for Buckner Children's Village in Beaumont until the members of First Baptist Church, Wolfforth stepped up to the task. More than 60 members of the church helped move the on-campus school back to its original location after Hurricane Katrina evacuees had occupied the space for nearly a year.

FBC Wolfforth volunteers help Buckner get facilities back to normal

By Jenny Pope

Buckner Benevolences

BEAUMONT—When Hurricane Rita threatened to strike the Gulf coast Sept. 21, 2005, more than 60 residents of Buckner Children’s Village and Calder Woods, a Buckner retirement community, evacuated together in a two-week, statewide shuffle from one location to the next.

And though most of the physical damage from the storm—broken fences, downed trees, water-logged carpets and sidewalks—have since been repaired, the two communities continue to mend the emotional damage one year later.

“Anytime there is an anniversary to a traumatic event, it can evoke some fear and stress,” said Greg Eubanks, executive director of Buckner Children’s Village in Beaumont.



The Buckner
Children's Village
activity room
received a
makeover from the
members of First
Baptist Church in
Wolfforth. Until
recently, Hurricane
Katrina evacuees
occupied the
space.

With hurricane stories dominating the Beaumont newscasts each night and many damaged homes still protected by plastic tarps, "I'm asked every day by children and staff wondering what we'll do if we have to evacuate again," he said. "It's at the forefront of everyone's minds."

Glenn Shoemake, executive director of Calder Woods, said that dealing with the post-traumatic stress among staff and residents is a slow and steady process of reassurance. He recently had a worried resident in independent living visit his office to discuss the very thing on everyone's mind—another evacuation.

"Basically, what he was asking me was: 'Will you help me?'" Shoemake said. "When I assured him that he could evacuate with the other (assisted living and nursing) residents if the situation arose, you could see his facial expression and his posture change completely.

"I wish I could say he was the only resident who has approached me, but dealing with this fear is an ongoing ministry that will not easily go away."

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In addition to the inevitable emotional stress, Calder Woods was perhaps hardest hit by the loss of 30 percent of the staff following the storm.

“Although we are blessed to be completely full (with residents), we still struggle to maintain a stable staff to care for all the needs,” Shoemake said. “Many people are having to work harder and longer to make up for it.”

“Being able to recruit new staff at the Children’s Village has been a challenge for us,” Eubanks said. “But the staff who have stayed with us throughout the crisis has gone the extra mile.

“We have staff that as recently as two weeks ago moved into their homes for the first time since the storm. So seeing them pour their hearts out to these kids, day after day, amazes me.”

But it’s not just the Children’s Village and Calder Woods that struggle with staffing needs. The available workforce in Southeast Texas has diminished, Eubanks said, as many who evacuated from the storm will not return.

“It’s a supply-and-demand thing,” Eubanks said. “There are just a few people here to work, and the demand is huge. So it’s hard to attract good labor.”

Despite the loss of skilled labor, the Children’s Village has benefited from the support of local churches and one special group of teenagers from First Baptist Church of Wolfforth.

The group planned to conduct Vacation Bible School in the area, but was washed out by area flooding and rain. In what Eubanks described as a “providential encounter,” the 60-person team organized themselves to relocate and refurbish an on-campus school that had preciously been moved to house Katrina evacuees.

“They also spent time with our children, playing games and talking to them,” he said. “They were sent by God and were a wonderful encouragement to us all.”

Both communities are prepared for another evacuation, should the situation arise, both Eubanks and Shoemake assured.

“We’ve revamped our evacuation plan and looked at what we did last year to see where we can do a better job,” Shoemake said. “Though you can never know 100 percent what will happen, we’re as prepared as we can be. We just pray that it won’t happen again.”

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