

Volunteer director feels calling to restore Mississippi town

September 5, 2006

Posted: 9/01/06

Volunteer director feels calling to restore Mississippi town

By Robert Marus

Associated Baptist Press

PASS CHRISTIAN, Miss. (ABP)—When Amy Hardee came from North Carolina to what locals call “the Pass” immediately after Hurricane Katrina, the place was a mess.

A year after Katrina’s monstrous storm surge virtually wiped Pass Christian, Miss., off the map, it’s still something of a mess. But thanks in part to Hardee, at least it’s a far better-organized mess—and one she is working diligently to return to its former glory as a Southern beach town.



Amy Hardee of North Carolina, volunteer relief coordinator in Pass Christian, Miss., explains some of the plans the Hurricane Katrina-decimated town has for redeveloping its historic beachfront while remaining family-friendly. (Photo by Robert Marus/ABP)

“The real problem is that our volunteers are drying up—that people think a year is long enough ... to be able to recover. And it’s not,” she said. “We’re just getting the debris picked up. We’re just getting to the edge where we’re going to start building.”

Hardee has become one of the organizational gurus at a small temporary building locals have dubbed the Gray Hut. It is the decimated town’s volunteer coordination center, where residents go to request help gutting a home and volunteer groups visit to find out what should be done to help ongoing recovery.

Sitting in the building, the minister and former Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missions volunteer from Hillsborough, N.C., recalled how she has given virtually all her free time the past year to help a town nearly 800

miles away recover from oblivion.

Less than a month after the hurricane's Aug. 29, 2005, landfall, Hardee—who currently serves as minister of education at a Presbyterian church—accompanied a truckload of emergency supplies donated by Hillsborough's citizens and destined for Pass Christian.

Special: One Year After Katrina

- [LIFE GOES ON: Crossroads project aims to rebuild in New Orleans](#)
 - [Displaced New Orleans resident finds home at Gracewood](#)
- [Houston faith communities plan for future hurricanes](#)
- [East Texas church sends minister to southern Louisiana](#)
 - [Texas Baptists urged to adopt unreached groups in Houston](#)
 - [Miracle Farm offers refuge to Hurricane Rita evacuees](#)
 - [Nederland church marks new beginning in new sanctuary](#)
- [Nehemiah's Vision helps Southeast Texas recover from Rita](#)
 - [New Orleans churches radically changed by Katrina](#)
- [Churches become rallying points for New Orleans recovery](#)
- [Baptist volunteers make impact on Crescent City](#)
- [Volunteer director feels calling to restore Mississippi town](#)
 - [Sabine Pass churches focus on rebuilding community](#)
 - [Gulfport members learn church is not brick and mortar](#)
- [Pastor uses retirement funds to help restore church](#)
 - [Couple left family, friends to run volunteer base in Gulfport](#)
 - [Katrina giving did not hurt other charities, group says](#)
 - [Inexperience hurt effectiveness of some Katrina relief groups](#)
 - [Teens from FBC Wolfforth help Buckner get facilities back to normal](#)

She fully intended to return to North Carolina after that.

But what she found compelled her to stay for awhile, and then return nine times in the past year, including a stint that began June 1 and lasted through the first week of August.

Pass Christian and the nearby towns of Bay St. Louis, Waveland and Long Beach were Ground Zero for Katrina's storm surge. The wall of water broke records for the area, with churning water at heights estimated at 30 feet or more above mean sea level, flattening almost everything within a half-mile of the beachfront.

When Hardee arrived, there still were two-story-high piles of debris from beachfront antebellum mansions, historic churches and the shotgun houses of the impoverished. Around town, she found several points of distribution for emergency supplies with lots of donated goods, lots of people who needed help and lots of volunteers. But there was little accompanying coordination that could link residents' needs with outside resources to meet them.

A natural organizer, Hardee decided she had better coordinate the relief efforts. "I went by and asked everybody for their spiral notebook" that various supply-distribution sites had been keeping, she said. They contained the names of residents who needed help and names of volunteers with skills or resources.

Those scattered spiral notebooks have been turned by Hardee and her fellow organizer—Pass resident Mariah Furze—into a computer database. The various points of distribution and volunteer coordination have given way to the Gray Hut, now the nerve center of the town's reconstruction effort. A "tent city" of eager college-age AmeriCorps volunteers is across the street.

Volunteers who have passed through the Gray Hut have managed to finish projects requested by local residents at 114 sites in the Pass. But now,

Hardee said, the really hard work begins.

“Now we’re reaching the point where all those little jobs are done,” she said—and by “little jobs,” she means everything from lot-clearing to gutting flooded houses. “Now we’re trying to figure out how to get plumbers paid for, how to get electricians paid for.”

Hardee said the town desperately needs skilled volunteers. While hundreds of workers from church youth groups and civic organizations came through this summer, she said, professionals and artisans who can begin reconstruction work in earnest are needed.

“So, the volunteers who came were greatly appreciated, but we’re in need of skilled labor now,” she said.

She also needs a long-term recovery plan and a group to implement it. Now that federal dollars for reconstruction finally are beginning to trickle down, she said, Pass Christian officials and others on the Mississippi Coast need to spend them wisely.

Hardee is working with government and Red Cross officials to get a long-term recovery committee up and running in the Pass. That group can help deal with many other post-Katrina problems she’s run across.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.