

Bill & Jennifer Strom update 9/26/05

Sorry for the long delay in updates, we ran into two monster obstacles over the weekend. Late Friday afternoon our camper developed a nasty carburetor problem, requiring a major intervention by a big-hearted mechanic who donated his Friday evening and half of Saturday to repairing and rebuilding Toonces to get us back on the road towards Katrina's pets.

Then Hurricane Rita decided to head east after landfall on the Texas-Louisiana border, bringing high winds and heavy rain to eastern Louisiana and western Mississippi and rendering unsafe our planned itinerary, which was to head for the Humane Society of Louisiana's temporary shelter in Tylertown, Miss.

So, Plan B.

Not wanting to cool our heels and wait the storm out while animals remained in need elsewhere, we struck south out of Atlanta and headed for the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, which hasn't gotten as much help (or press) as New Orleans, even though Katrina's eye actually struck here.

We arrived in Gulfport, Miss., very early this morning and here's how our day went:

-- We checked in first thing at the Humane Society of Southern Miss., where they are accepting strays and owner-surrendered animals in their new building, which was under construction when Katrina hit, and almost, oh-so-close to being finished. They also have salvaged some use of their old building, where there are dog runs still standing. Project Halo out of Charlotte was there with lots of volunteers working hard, and the warehouse space at their new building was lined with piles and piles of dog and cat food, cat litter, leashes, collars, crates and anything else you could possibly need to sustain a large rescue operation. But their faces lit up when I told them we had crate fans, and we left them with 20 for their most heat-stressed animals. They had things well in hand, so we interviewed a few of the volunteers about where the greatest needs still remain, and they advised that the beach towns west of Gulfport had no animal support and no one had trucked food out to them, though there was plenty in Gulfport, it hadn't been distributed. We took some extra food from their supplies to supplement what we had, and set out.

-- We spent the rest of the day in Pass Christian, very close to where Katrina made landfall. To say the town is flattened doesn't do it justice, and since I'm relying on a dial-up connection I can't send too many pictures, but let me just say the devastation is utterly shocking. There are large boats in trees. There are businesses and houses reduced to sticks and shingles. The town was under a 35-foot storm surge for 12 or 15 hours. Walking down the road is like standing in the bottom of a septic tank. There is no running water, no sewer service, no

electricity. We went to the Red Cross relief center in the center of town, it was eerily like a flea market or a street festival, with sun shelters over tables of goods, but nothing was for sale, it was all to give away to whoever needed it, and there were lots of people looking for pet food and supplies, people who are camping next to their wrecked houses, trying to keep what little they have left together. We stocked up the dismal little pile of pet supplies there with food, treats, bowls, collars, leashes and other stuff from our stockpile of donations in the horse trailer. One woman said her dog had given birth to a litter of puppies right after the storm hit and she'd been struggling to feed the momma dog ever since. I sent her home with 40 pounds of high-quality kibble and a bunch of treats.

People were so grateful. You all have made this possible.

-- After giving the Red Cross relief center director my cell number and asking him to call if/when supplies ran low again, we headed back out into Pass Christian to look for animals to help. A friendly local policewoman let us know about a private rescuer who was overwhelmed with taking care of more than 100 dogs left homeless in the storm, along with an apparently large number of dogs she'd been caring for since long before Katrina hit. We tracked her down, and found that she and her grown son and daughter were caring for dozens and dozens and dozens, of dogs even though they had lost their own houses and were living in tent and tarp shelters. They had already had visits from CARA (another rescue group) and a couple from Virginia had heard about them from Noah's Wish and sent a U-Haul with 6,000 pounds of food and treats. CARA had moved 42 of the dogs to Jackson, Miss., this morning, planning to reunite them with their owners or put them up for adoption after the mandatory holding period. We were able to improve living conditions for the dogs considerably -- again, thanks to your help -- by getting three momma dogs with litters of newborn puppies (12 hours, 3 days and 1 week old, respectively) up off of the dirty ground, off of tie ropes and out of a kiddie pool and into spacious clean crates with clean blankets and food and water dishes, and a huge fan (they had a generator already) to cool all three young families. (See pics) The rescuers had built really nice runs to hold dogs, which were flooded again on Friday night after Rita, and temporarily unusable until the mud dried out, and they didn't have enough big crates, so in addition to setting up the momma dogs and puppies we got a few other dogs out of too-small crates and into big ones. We also gave them our fencing supplies to make more runs on dry land. While Bill was unloading supplies for them, a man and a woman driving by saw our trailer open with all the pet supplies stacked up and stopped to beg for dog food. Both had hungry dogs at home. They took about 100 pounds of dog food and the man's face lit up when Bill told him we had horse food, too, and he took that as well. We told him where he could get more when he needed it.

We gave the private rescuers heartworm preventive, some crate fans, grooming supplies, betadine, antibiotic cream and a bunch of other stuff. We worked with the concerned police officer about this situation, and we will continue to assist this family to help them find the owners of the displaced dogs and send

unclaimed ones to no-kill rescues for rehoming.

-- Finally, after promising to come back before leaving the region to check on things, we headed even further west thinking to make it to Waveland, another small town where resources were low. But we stopped at an elementary school to plan our route and were distracted by excited yelping. A trip across the street revealed "Fifty," a boxer-mix puppy deeply in need of a larger crate and some dog food.

--After that, some sheriff's deputies rolled up to Toonces and let us know that curfew was approaching and they were getting ready to go deal with some unpleasant matters involving guns, and we'd best move along.

-- We are safe and sound back in Gulfport for the night, camped out in a parking lot with lots of other hurricane relief types, electrical linemen, tree crews and all sorts of other helpers.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, you have each made an incredible contribution to many canine and feline lives, and helped their human families, as well. The totality of the wreckage is heart-wrenching, and we are humbled at the chance to help.

Updates when we can.

Jen and Bill