

STROM UPDATE 9/27/05 a.m.

What a day.

Yesterday, (with all your help!) we personally saved seven lives, and helped countless more.

We arrived in Bay St. Louis early yesterday morning. For those of you without intimate knowledge of what's left of Mississippi's Gulf Coast, BSL is a fairly good-sized town that sits out on a spit of land between the Gulf and St. Louis Bay. I can't begin to describe the devastation. There is not a building standing intact, and in some areas of town, not very many standing at all. On the road in, there were whole houses (not mobile homes, but actual houses) that had been picked up by the storm and deposited in odd places, like the median of the highway. A used car lot had no cars on it -- they were all up in trees, upside down in nearby ditches, and on the roof of what was left of the office.

The property damage was one thing, shocking enough to take your breath away, just driving through. But the human cost was unbearably sad. But when we arrived at the main intersection where the Red Cross was setting up on one side (having just moved from a local park to a large grocery store parking lot because of the demand for services, apparently) and a huge church group had set up on the opposite corner, the lines of displaced citizens snaked around the block. Both sites offered free food, bottled water, clothing, and other household necessities like diapers and cooking pots, while the church group threw in all the free Bibles you wanted and the Red Cross had a couple of stations set up to process paperwork like FEMA housing vouchers and job-hunting assistance. There was no provision for people trying to keep their pets at either place, though lots of folks had dogs on leashes with them and told us stories of pets living in their cars with them, of keeping multiple cats and dogs of friends and relatives who might come back, etc. Rumor was another out-of-town animal rescue group had been there giving out food and taking in strays in the early days of the mess, but had been gone for several weeks. It was four weeks since Katrina hit, to the day, and these people were just starting to get help. Of course, Wal-Mart had set up a huge air-conditioned tent next to the Red Cross center, and they were open for business as usual.

After giving the commander my card and asking him to call me on my cell if there was anything else we could do, we set off for the edges of town, where we'd heard lots of dogs and cats needed us. We eventually arrived at a Christian mission relief center set up in a big ballfield to serve hot meals three times a day to local residents camping next to their houses, volunteer workers, telephone and electric company repair people, anyone who was hungry. We met a volunteer there who'd been there for several weeks and

gotten to know a lot of people and animals in the surrounding neighborhood, who lit up as soon as she spied my IAR shirt, and thanked us desperately for coming even before we'd done anything. This mission group had the whole rescue thing going on -- RVs, refrigerated tractor trailers, huge shade tents, cooking facilities. But again, no provisions for pets. All the focus on trapped and abandoned animals in New Orleans that makes the news is only a tiny part of the picture of the disaster Katrina wreaked in the companion animal world. Even the animals who escaped with their human families intact are suffering from the aftermath, and there are abandoned animals starving to death everywhere and more being abandoned every day (more on that later).

From the animal-loving volunteer, we learned of two cats and a dog living with their homeless families, who were crashing on cots in the hallway at a senior center across the street. We set them up with bedding and litter boxes, litter, toys and treats. One of the cats belonged to a young boy, who got really upset telling us that all 40 of his father's hunting beagles had drowned in their kennels during the hurricane, so he was particularly grateful to have saved his cat, and gotten her all set up in her temporary home with our help. We also met an employee there who is caring for eight large dogs in her home, all of whom belong to friends and family members who had to evacuate and leave their pets behind indefinitely. We stocked her up with big bags of food, chew bones, squeaky toys and treats, and she burst into tears and insisted on hugging me.

Then the volunteers at the Christian mission food tent asked us to help an elderly guy down the street who had moved into his dog kennel for shelter after Katrina knocked his house over. His dogs, a young female beagle and an elderly male basset mix, were both sickly, clearly in need of veterinary care long before they had to give their houses over to their dad, who clearly adored them but was in no position to care for them in his current situation. We promised we could get them to a vet and find someone to take care of them until he was able, or else find them a wonderful new home. When he agreed, we whisked them away to the safety of our air-conditioned RV, where they passed the afternoon napping in clean new beds.

Next, the ladies from the Christian mission led us to a house where a friendly black momma cat had been carrying around one tiny kitten for several days. The kitten had an infected eye and didn't seem to be nursing much. The family had moved permanently to Texas and left that cat and another one with the neighbors, who asked us to take them away. The second cat, a gorgeous light-gray Himalayan with striking blue eyes and an infected front paw, showed up as soon as we set out food. Both adult cats were very friendly and very hungry. We were concerned about where the

rest of the kittens might be, and afraid to evacuate the momma and leave unseen babies to starve. After searching unsuccessfully on our bellies with flashlights under the house, we crated the Himalayan and put her in the cool RV, left food and water and decided to come back later and hope the momma would bring the rest of the babies out to see us. But no luck. So then it was a hard decision to take them -- but as hungry as momma cat was and as sickly as the kitten was, we decided better to get those two to safety, and figured it likely the rest of the litter had perished in the storm. But as we were packing up our stuff, Bill made one last pass around the house that turned out to be a miraculous catch. Up on the roof of the porch, he spied two tiny bundles of fur tucked up under the eave, about 10 feet off the ground (see pic). A ladder was produced from the relief center, and two healthy kittens joined their momma and sister.

We made a quick stop on our way out of town to put more supplies at the Red Cross center (where they were snapped up so fast we ended up begging another Gulfport volunteer to go back on a late-evening refill run). The lines still went around the block. As we unloaded stuff off the trailer, a young couple sitting with all their worldly possessions in a pickup truck made a beeline for us, asking for food for their two chihuahuas, two big dogs, and several cats. They had been there since dawn. It was almost 4 and they hadn't been seen by authorities yet. We loaded them up with our last bag of dog food and a few cans left from our supply out of Gulfport, where there's a huge warehouse full to the ceilings but no one (but, apparently, us) to distribute it to outlying areas. We gave them lots of toys and treats, tiny squeakies and jingle balls for the chihuahuas and big stuffed animals and Kongs for the big dogs, catnip mice and feather toys for the cats. I want you all to picture all the wonderful things you donated going right into their hands. Compared to the losing their house, their jobs, their hometown, it was a small thing, but it really cheered them up digging through the bins of toys and treats picking out stuff for their canine and feline families. We told them how to find the Humane Society of Southern Miss. (HSSM) in Gulfport so that they could pick up more food when it ran out.

Then, we were off to the HSSM headquarters. There, Project Halo (a no-kill rescue like IAR) took over our charges, and will bring all the cats and kittens back to North Carolina for adoption. Bill and I bathed the beagle and the basset and tucked them into snug new beds in crates right next to each other, where they had supper and were snoring and waiting to see the vet when we left last night. Project Halo has agreed to care for them as "fosters" until Oct. 15, when the owner can either reclaim them or release them for adoption.

We left the humane society last night desperate for a shower and a meal (It's so hot, it's so hot, we are going through multiple T-shirts every day because they are dripping by 9 a.m. I actually drank a whole half-gallon of gatorade in one sitting yesterday, and didn't even notice it was an unusual thing). As we were in the parking lot saying goodbye, a family with two kids and two adorable black mutts drove up. The mother got the dogs out of the car on leashes, walked them over to where the volunteers were gathered, and said she just couldn't do it any more, they'd lost their house and everything in it, would we please find them a good home? They hugged the dogs goodbye, the kids cried, and they got in the car and drove away. The mutts stood there looking down the road, their happy waggy tails sort of tapering off into droops while they looked up at us bewilderedly.

This is happening EVERY DAY, ALL DAY, at every shelter down here, and there is nowhere to house them all even temporarily while transport to out-of-state groups is found. These two are lucky -- Project Halo has agreed to take all owner-surrendered animals from Gulfport. But there are lots of other shelters without no-kill partner groups, and the euthanasia rates are sky-rocketing.

Thanks for making it possible for us to help.

Jen and Bill