

AFTER KATRINA, THE LIMITS OF CHARITY

BY JEANNINE AMBER · ESSENCE · SEPTEMBER 08, 2005

NOW IN HOUSTON, SURVIVORS WORK TO REGAIN CONTROL OF THEIR LIVES

In her second dispatch from the field, our reporter JEANNINE AMBER talks to evacuees at the Houston Astrodome about what they need more than charity. In the coming days and weeks, as part of our mission to keep readers informed, we'll share other first-person accounts of Katrina's aftermath, and report on efforts to help our displaced citizens resume their lives.

Five days after being evacuated from New Orleans to the Houston Astrodome, Jimmy Jones and Jim Johnston are off on a mission to fill a need that none of the relief agencies are providing. "We're going downtown to sell our food stamps," says Jones, a welder. "What we need is some money in our pockets."

Johnston, a retired veteran who has wounds on his face from breaking through his roof to escape the flooding in his house, rattles off a list of the donated clothing and toiletries that he keeps in a plastic trash bag under a blanket near his cot: five pairs of pants, seven shirts, 12 bars of soap, two bottles of hand sanitizer, eight briefs, five pairs of socks. "And they gave me about eight different deodorants," he says.

Food, too, is abundant in the makeshift shelter. Sandwiches, packaged chips, water and soda are laid out on dozens of tables lining the perimeter of the auditorium. Piled in small pyramids and available 24 hours a day, the food almost seems too much. "They wake you up first thing in the morning and push a sandwich in your face," Jimmy Jones says. "But really, all I want at that hour is to sleep." It's not that he's not grateful for the provisions, but a grown man can live on handouts for only so long. "I want to get back home," he says. "I want to get back to work. I can't keep going like this."

It's a sentiment echoed by many of the evacuees. They appreciate the help that has been offered, but as the days add up, they need more than food and clothing. They need what most of us take for granted—the ability to make basic decisions about their lives. They want to buy and prepare their own meals and decide when they will go to sleep each night (the Astrodome has an 11 p.m. curfew). After more than a week of living at the mercy of Mother Nature and a faceless political bureaucracy, they need to feel in control of their lives again. They need their dignity.

Finding Shelter From the Storm

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In her third dispatch from the beleaguered Gulf Coast, our reporter JEANNINE AMBER considers how and when evacuees from areas hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina can begin to establish a new home base for themselves and their families. In the coming days and weeks, as part of our mission to keep readers informed, we'll share other first-person accounts of Katrina's aftermath, put the disaster in historical and political context, and report on efforts to help our displaced citizens resume their lives.

"I never used to think much about homeless people," admits Ann Marie Brown, sitting outside the Astrodome with her family last Monday night. "But now I know just how they feel. Yesterday a woman asked me if it was all right if she gave us some money. I don't want to take her money. But what can I do? We left New Orleans with nothing but the clothes on our backs."

Brown, who is with two small children and her one-month-old grandson, is holding a flyer handed to her by a passerby that reads, "Wanted for Mass Murder: The Bush Regime trapped at least 100,000 people in New Orleans by refusing to provide them with the means to leave." She shakes her head. "We really do need a President who cares about people no matter what color they are," she muses.

At that moment, an SUV pulls up and the driver, an African-American woman, beckons to Brown. She tells Brown that she has space at her home for the whole family if they want to come. Brown takes the woman's phone number, thanks her for her kind offer, but ultimately declines. "That was so generous, but I just can't do it," she tells me afterward. "I can't be cooking in someone else's kitchen with them looking at me. I just can't do that." She adds that people don't really understand the conditions at the Astrodome. It's clean and bright but the cold sandwiches and packaged chips are a far cry from the catfish and gumbo she's used to cooking up for her family. She is silent for a few moments, and then she sighs. "I'm homesick," she says. "I need an apartment, a real place to stay."

It doesn't help that some of the young men at the Astrodome make Brown nervous. "There are people from a lot of different projects here," she says. "And a lot of those projects don't get along. You know, the 9th Ward might have a beef with the 11th Ward and now they're all in here together." Even so, there have been few reports of violence at the Astrodome, and just 25 or so arrests, mostly for public intoxication.

Still, it isn't easy conducting your life in public. "Every day I wake up thinking I am back in my house," Brown says. "Then I look around and there are a million people staring at me. I want to cry so bad but I have to be strong." But as much as Brown and others want to leave the Astrodome, they are reluctant to move until they've found missing family members, many of whom were separated during the chaotic evacuation process.

On Monday night it was announced that buses would come to the Astrodome to take four thousand evacuees to several luxury cruise ships, supplied by Carnival Cruise Lines, that were docked in Galveston, Texas. On Tuesday morning the plan was scrapped because there were no takers.

That same day, Father Ray, a priest from Corpus Christi who was evacuated when 20 feet of water surrounded his house, walked the corridors of the Astrodome asking Katrina survivors to sign a petition asking the federal government to provide immediate cash grants so evacuees could find a place to live, begin their search for jobs, and transition out of the shelters. "Those shelters did what was important—they got us out," reads the petition put out by an ad hoc group called the Survivors Leadership Team in the Astrodome, in conjunction with the Houston-based advocacy group Metropolitan Organization. "But we need to move out of them as soon as possible, while maintaining the freedom to decide where we will live."

No doubt about it: Katrina's survivors are aching to get on with their lives. But as Father Ray's petition points out, no one is under any illusions about just how critical a role volunteers have played. While FEMA struggles to get its act together amid reports that they have completely mishandled the relief efforts, volunteers who give their time seem to be making a real difference in the lives of those still at the Astrodome.

In one corner of the makeshift shelter, surrounded by handwritten signs from people trying to locate missing relatives and friends, Ms H.B. Smith from the Bell Star Beauty Bar in Houston has set up a temporary salon. Hair creams and hot combs are neatly spread on a table beside her. "I just figured it was the least I could do," she says running a curling iron through a survivor's hair while a dozen other women stand patiently in line.

"Y'all are a blessing," one of the women tells her. "You really are."