

CPA

magazine

In the Eye of the Hurricane: Accountants Help Those in Need

*Geralyn Z. Suhor
St. Bernard Parish, La.*

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Volume 5 No. 2
April/May 2006

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In the Eye of the Hurricane: *Accountants Help Those in Need*

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KATRINA PHOTOS COURTESY CHIEF OF POLICE, LUMBERTON, MISS.



Hurricane Katrina at landfall

Many heroes surfaced in the midst of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast on Sept. 29, 2005. While many of them were the ones you would expect—paramedics, firefighters and police officers—others who impacted the lives of those affected were not your typical emergency responders.

In times of crisis, people respond. Here are three very true stories of Gulf Coast-area accountants who brought essential aid to those stranded without food, water and shelter.

Geralyn Suhor: Putting the Pieces Back Together

Geralyn Z. Suhor, 2005-06 president of the New Orleans Chapter of the Society of Louisiana CPAs, knows first-hand the indiscriminate destruction of Hurricane Katrina. She is a sole proprietor who worked out of her home in St. Bernard Parish, one of the areas in which the eye of the hurricane passed directly over, causing mass destruction and complete flooding.



Geralyn Suhor

Geralyn had a disaster plan for her practice; she made backups of everything she had onto CDs, which she planned to take with her in the wake of a disaster. Unfortunately, her disaster plan could not be implemented because she was already out of town when Katrina struck New Orleans. On the Friday prior to Monday when Katrina hit, Geralyn had taken her two children to Jackson, Miss. for them to play in a tennis tournament. At that time, the projected path of the hurricane showed it turning and heading back toward Florida, so she didn't think her home and practice would be in danger.

She learned, the next morning, that the path had changed and Katrina was moving directly toward New Orleans. At that point, there was nothing she could do.

She first tried to go to her sister's house in Lake Charles, La., but all of the inbound lanes into Louisiana were reversed to outbound lanes so mandatory evacuations could occur. She couldn't cross over the state border at that location, so she resolved to travel to Baton Rouge where her other sister lives. Geralyn and her kids arrived there on Sunday.

The levee breaks in New Orleans were confirmed on the following Tuesday. Not only had St. Bernard parish suffered, but the flooding from the levee breaks completely destroyed everything. As a result, Geralyn stayed with her sister for the next four months. Residents weren't allowed back into the parish until Sept. 28 to assess their damage, and at that time, they were only permitted to "look and leave;" nobody was allowed to stay.

"I went in with my protective gear on and attempted to recover client information out of my home office filing cabinet," she says. "When the canals overflow, it's not just water that floods the city—sewage, motor oil, mud and snakes are in that water."

She extracted the soggy, contaminated files from the top

drawer of the cabinet. The second and third drawers were also retrievable, but not as readable. The fourth drawer couldn't even be opened; it was rusted shut and the mud on the outside was 18 inches deep. The files inside were, most likely, completely destroyed.

"My office was the worst room in the house," says Geralyn. "It really tells an interesting story of the destruction that water and wind can do."

Geralyn took the wet, smelly files back to her sister's house in Baton Rouge, spread them out across the yard to dry them out and used a small copier she had purchased from a local office supplies store to make copies of the contaminated documents. After that, she burned the old files to destroy the information, as well as the smell.



"I was at a point where I knew that 85 percent of my clients were in St. Bernard and had been affected by the storm. I had lost everything in my practice and didn't know if I should try to pick up the pieces or look for a position with a firm somewhere else."

She found a two-year-old client list in her files and was able to use that to try to locate them by mailing out letters in October stating where she was located and how to contact her. Despite her best efforts, the postal service was paralyzed from the hurricane, which caused her letters to be diverted through Texas where they were sorted and mailed out. It took until December for Geralyn to receive most of her letters back as undeliverable.

In June 2005, the Louisiana Society of CPAs held their

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annual conference in Hawaii. It was there that Geralyn met the people who would now help her get her practice back up and running. Charles Coe Jr., CPA, managing member of CoeSolutions.com, was a speaker on technology at the conference. He and his wife met Geralyn and her family at the conference and they all hit it off while they were there.

“When I saw on the LCPA website that she [Geralyn] had been displaced, I picked up the phone and offered her help,” says Charles. “It was nothing she would not have done had the roles been reversed.”

Charles’ own business had been hit by Katrina and was down for about 30 days after the hurricane. Once he was able to get his business back on track, he started helping others regain their businesses.

“Charles somehow tracked me down at my sister’s place in Baton Rouge and called me in October,” says Geralyn. “He said he had space in his office in Metairie for me, complete with a desk, computer, filing cabinets and whatever I needed to come and work.”

Geralyn began staying in Metairie during the weekdays and working out of the *CoeSolutions.com* office. Charles tried to

recover data from the back-up CDs and the hard drive that Geralyn retrieved from her destroyed office. If the damage was caused by just water, then he would have been able to salvage the files, but since the water was contaminated with chemicals, all his recovery efforts were unsuccessful. The chemicals had completely destroyed the hard drive by eating away the metal. The CDs had the silver lining eaten away, which made them unreadable.

Charles created a website for Geralyn at *www.suborcpa.com* to try to help her find her displaced clients and gain new clients as well. At the time, the IRS recommended that people use accountants for their casualty losses. To promote business, Geralyn put up signs around St. Bernard Parish so people from the area would see her name and that she was also from the parish. Then, hopefully, they would contact her by phone or through her website for their accounting needs. “That has actually been a great boost to getting business,” she says.

Geralyn looks forward to growing her practice back as she continues to pick up the pieces. She has plans to make adjustments to her disaster plan once she has a permanent location.

“In the future, I would take my backups and make sure they are in a different location, or even entertain the idea of web storage. You should always have a briefcase packed and ready to go with your important papers and personal documents. You also need to duplicate papers and evaluate your insurance coverage on an annual basis.”

Charles recommends making sure that the media you use to back up your data also is able to withstand the disaster. Keep website information hosted off site and consider using an Internet service for your storage needs.



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Shane Garbutt: Rescue and Repair

Shane Patrick Garbutt, Audit senior manager with Pannell Kerr Forster of Texas P.C. in Houston, has a more personal story. His original mission was to find his family. In the end, he wound up helping the town of Gulfport, Miss.

Less than 24 hours after the eye of Hurricane Katrina passed over Mississippi, Shane was in his truck headed for Gulfport. Shane’s wife, Shannon, has many close family members who live there, including her mother and father. Shane and Shannon lost contact with them the morning the hurricane struck; the last time they heard from the family was when the wind was already starting to damage the house.

Shane prepared for his 400-mile journey after learning from media reports that a school being used as a shelter, located just a few miles from the house, had collapsed.

“My main objective was to get to our parents’ home, which is where most of the family was bunkering down together,

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he says. A trip that would normally take seven to eight hours took more than 16. "As I approached the damage field, all non-interstate roads were completely covered in debris and impassible. There was no power or fuel available for the last 180 miles of the trip, which took me eight hours to drive."



Shane Garbutt

Shane arrived in Hattiesburg, Miss., at dusk and saw significant damage to structures with no power. He finally made it to Gulfport around 1 a.m. and said he was relieved to see the shapes of houses as his headlights hit them. When he arrived at the home of his in-laws, he was happy to find all family members safely accounted for with the exclusion of his brother-in-law, Klain Garriga, and sister-in-law, Lynette Garriga, who are Gulfport police officers. They were both on duty that night working the second, of many, consecutive 21-hour shifts they would endure.

"One thing that amazed me was driving through the interior area and seeing people lining up at gas stations and convenience stores knowing they were not going to open for days. But, as one of them said to me 'What else can we do?' It was a highway of empty souls, a combination of New Orleans evacuees and good old-fashioned country folk trying to secure supplies for their families. It was surreal and heart-wrenching."

Shane's initial focus on the immediate needs of his family, then grew into helping the citizens of Gulfport.

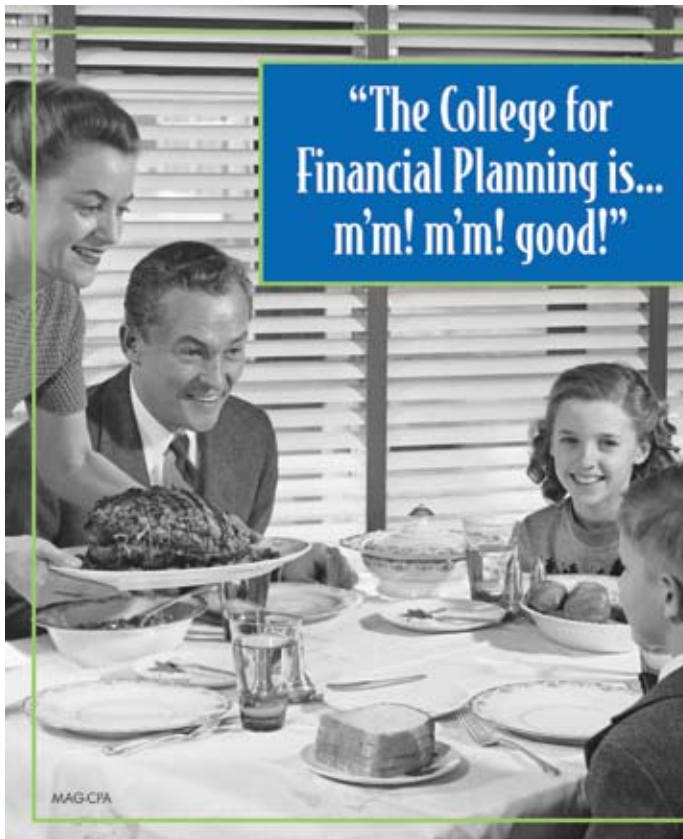
"I went back to Houston to get supplies, such as basic toilet-

ries, and did these types of supply runs for the first few weeks after the storm," he says. "In the first week, I put about 3,000 to 4,000 miles on my Jeep driving back and forth. I continued to provide supplies until Hurricane Rita hit Texas and the Gulf Coast. I plan to go back after the busy season and volunteer some more."

Shane was not working officially with any organization, although he was raising money for a charity called Gulfport Emergency

Response Benefit Fund. Approximately 30 first responders lost everything in the hurricane and the community was raising money to help get them shelter.

"Through PKF Texas and its employees, I was able to present \$2,500 to the benefit fund. Colleagues also contributed physical goods, such as clothing and other material items, worth in the thousands of dollars. I want to thank PKF for the support they showed for me through this time, both in terms of contribution and flexibility with my time."



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