

## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes



**Volunteers of America, Greater Baton Rouge, Inc.**  
**Southwest Louisiana Programs ■ 340 Kirby Street ■ Lake Charles, Louisiana 70601**

## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes

On August 28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the southeastern shores of Louisiana forever changing our history. As people fled New Orleans, it is estimated that around 20,000 found shelter in Southwest Louisiana in hotels and motels, churches, public shelters, and with friends and family. Most expected to be able to return within a few days, but when the levees broke, the reality of not being able to return soon began to sink in. During the next weeks, residents of Southwest Louisiana welcomed the Katrina survivors into our community, offering both physical and emotional support as they were coming to terms with their future. Then with the approach of Hurricane Rita, all in Southwest Louisiana began to prepare for a new disaster. Under a mandatory evacuation, Katrina evacuees had to be re-evacuated, and residents prepared to leave. On September 24, 2005, Hurricane Rita hit the southwestern shores of Louisiana, devastating the area with its destructive winds and leaving behind broken homes, businesses, and lives. Despite the unbelievable obstacles that lay before the people of south Louisiana, there are those among us who stand out. They inspired our community as they went above and beyond to help others even when many times they were and are dealing with their own recovery.

This is a collection of stories designed to engage, inspire and transform readers as well as survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. These stories, told by *Louisiana Spirit* and *Volunteers of America, Greater Baton Rouge, Inc.* staff members, as well as the heroes themselves, are also designed to promote positive feelings, instill confidence, give direction and hope. The stories supply a wealth of knowledge of the work done by many in the aftermath the hurricanes, and leave small history lessons of how recovery happens after a disaster.

The individuals featured in this publication don't consider themselves heroic, but instead insist they simply are everyday people who acted without thinking or knowing who was watching their actions. The "Unsung Heroes" were not looking for recognition for their works, but these are the people who make up Louisiana's "**human**" Spirit.

IN COMMEMORATION OF  
OF HURRICANE KATRINA AND HURRICANE RITA  
NOVEMBER 2007

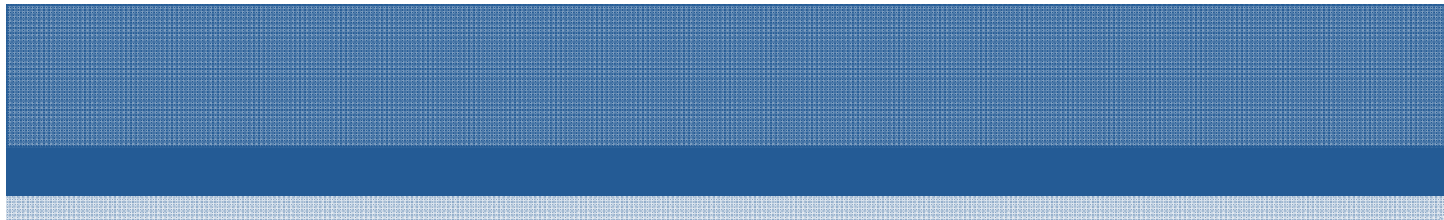




## Table of Contents

Jennifer Jones, Cameron Parish.....	7
Norman & Debbie Thomas, Calcasieu Parish.....	8
Shandee Niswander, Vernon Parish.....	9
Wayne Taylor, Cameron Parish .....	10
Pearl Cole, Calcasieu Parish.....	11
Roger Templeton, Calcasieu Parish.....	12
Corinne Pearce, Vernon Parish .....	13
Catherine Thomas, Calcasieu Parish .....	14
Geraldine McDaniel, Calcasieu Parish.....	15
Mae Dell Jackson, Beauregard Parish.....	16
Grand Chenier Library Staff, Cameron Parish .....	17
June & Mancel Reeves, Allen Parish .....	18
Sylvia Stelly, Calcasieu Parish .....	19
Sunny King, Beauregard Parish .....	20
Pauline Hurst, Calcasieu Parish.....	21
Melvin Haymon, Vernon Parish .....	22
Vera Abraham, Jeff Davis Parish.....	23
Dinah Landry, Cameron Parish .....	24

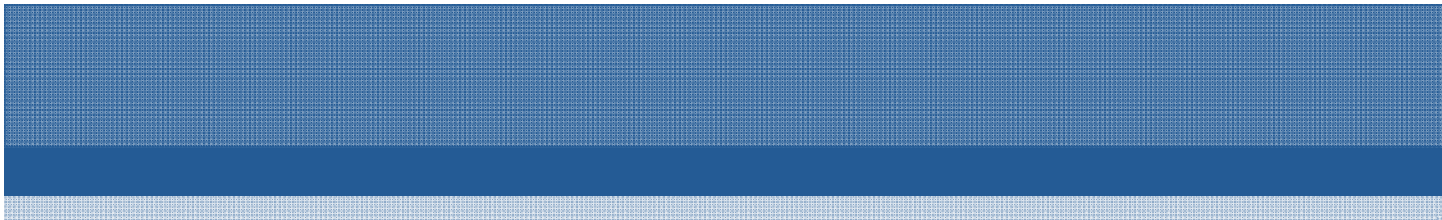
## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes



Larry Benton, Calcasieu Parish .....	25
Michael Paxton, Allen Parish .....	26
Church of God in Christ, Beauregard Parish.....	27
Virginia Iles, Calcasieu Parish.....	28
Carl Evans Broussard, Cameron Parish .....	29
Jorry Dryer, Allen Parish .....	30
Talita Allison, Orleans Parish .....	31
Donald Springfield, Calcasieu Parish.....	32
Faithshare Staff, Cameron Parish .....	33
Barbara Cahee, Calcasieu Parish.....	34
Bobby Smith, Beauregard Parish .....	35
Margaret Jackson, Calcasieu Parish .....	36
Adrian Hunt, Jeff Davis Parish.....	37
Staff of Greater St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church, Calcasieu Parish .....	38
Larry Smith, Calcasieu Parish .....	39
Sheldon Hitchens Family, Beauregard Parish .....	40
Mona Lisa Garrett, Calcasieu Parish.....	41
Teddy Broussard, Cameron Parish .....	42
Bamela Brown, Beauregard Parish .....	43

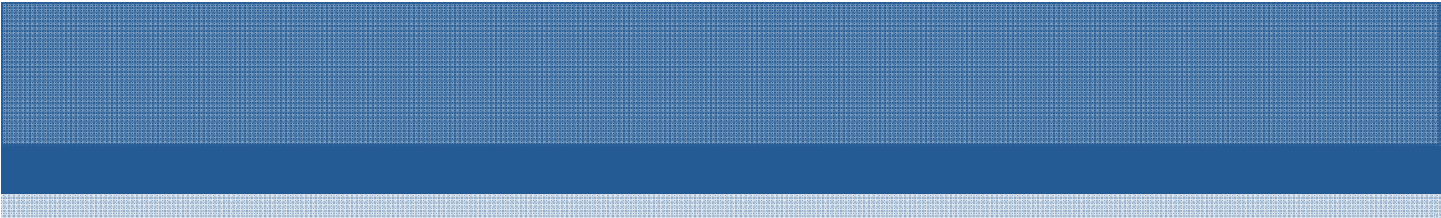
## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes





The Fat Boys, Calcasieu Parish .....	44
Mary & Neil Early, Vernon Parish .....	45
Samuel C. Tolbert, Jr., Calcasieu Parish.....	46
James Moore, Cameron Parish .....	47
Lisa Toney, Beauregard Parish .....	48
Arthur Booth, Cameron Parish .....	49
Felicia Charles, Beauregard Parish .....	50
Brent Sarvunt, Calcasieu Parish .....	51
Austin Spell, Jeff Davis Parish .....	52
Charles Guillory, Calcasieu Parish .....	53
Linda Chevalier, Cameron Parish.....	54
Bobby Judd, Calcasieu Parish .....	55
Linda Ceaser & AmeriCorps, Calcasieu Parish .....	56
Brian Wells, Jeff Davis Parish .....	57
Paula Rose, Beauregard Parish.....	58
Noelie McDaniel, Calcasieu Parish.....	59
Letha Keyes, Jeff Davis Parish.....	60
Darlene Dyson, Cameron Parish .....	61
The Volunteers, Chicago, Illinois .....	62

## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes



Legare Clement, Calcasieu Parish.....	63
Natha Gant, Beauregard Parish .....	64
Shane and Tammie Conner, Cameron Parish .....	65
Norbert Clemens, Calcasieu Parish .....	66
Karl Bruce, Calcasieu Parish.....	67
Jerome Ringo, Calcasieu Parish .....	68
Mary Ann Dutton, Calcasieu Parish .....	69

**Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Jennifer Jones**



By January of 2006, no health care existed in Cameron due to the devastation caused by Hurricane Rita. Sick residents had to drive to Lake Charles or further on bad roads. Jennifer, an attorney, fought on a daily basis to reopen health care facilities, and eventually her pleas were heard as the governor's office pushed through the approval and funding.

In an effort to rebuild the hospital with the new and more expensive elevation standards, Jennifer sought out funds to help the rebuilding efforts. As a result of Jennifer's tenacity, the Cameron Hospital was awarded \$2 million for operating expenses.

During this same time, Ms. Jones was fighting the insurance companies for quick payment. She handled 524 claims for Cameron residents pro-bono. Most of these claimants, all represented for free, would have been denied their claims without the aid of Ms. Jones.

Ms. Jones says "It may take a decade, but Cameron will be rebuilt."

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Reverend Norman and Dr. Debbie Thomas**



Dr. Debbie Thomas talked passionately about the time she and her husband, Reverend Norman Thomas, devoted to helping Lake Charles and the surrounding community recover from Hurricane Rita. When they returned from evacuating and realized their home had received very little damage, they took it as a sign that it was time to roll up their sleeves and get to work. Their first instinct was to care for survivors on all levels – emotional, physical, and spiritual. Dr. Debbie knew that people would seek God in a crisis. “It’s a spiritual instinct”, she said.

They quickly discovered that survivors desperately wanted to know that their friends and neighbors were safe. So, they initiated an on-line forum where friends and neighbors could blog about their personal experiences and let each other know where they were and that they were safe.

Their local church was badly damaged, so their next task was to find a meeting place for their congregation to Connect. Local ministers soon invited the congregation to join in their services. The burden seemed to get a little lighter. So, Reverend Norman and Dr. Debbie began to encourage their congregation to get busy. Some cleaned yards, some cooked and fed others, some worked at local shelters. Everyone was encouraged to find a way to pitch in.

Dr. Debbie personally went to local distribution centers and picked up anything and everything they would load into her vehicle. As soon as they learned she was a pastor, they loaded her down with water, baby needs, soap, and cleaning supplies. “You name it, I had it,” she said. She delivered the supplies and went back for more. She did this over and over, constantly comforting, encouraging, and praying for anyone that she could.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**



## **Shandee Niswander**



The students, staff and faculty of Northwestern State University at Leesville put forth their own extraordinary efforts to assist in recovery after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Students of the university were providing shelter to family and friends who were left homeless by Hurricane Katrina. Faculty, staff and students held an emergency meeting to determine a needs assessment for the university community. “The library offered to be a collection

center, coordinated efforts and developed a needs form,” states Head Librarian, Corinne Pearce. By the time Rita hit, a protocol had been established.

Shandee Niswander (center) was a student and worked in the University bookstore at that time and was very instrumental in getting things organized and sorted. She said that the university community contributed food, clothing and household goods and that, “the back of the library became a huge distribution center”. “She came in and helped whenever she could”, said Linda West, Library Specialist, pictured left. Christopher, Shandee’s brother, along with several other students helped, also. Shandee, who purchased Wal Mart Gift Cards to help others, is now the Manager of the University Book Store. Ms. Linda states that the library student workers contributed greatly during that difficult time and that everyone maintained the library distribution center named “Make a Wish at NSU” for almost two months.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Reverend Wayne Taylor**



Ask anyone in Cameron who was a hero after Hurricane Rita and Reverend Taylor's name is bound to be mentioned. He was pastor of Sweetlake United Methodist Church located on the Calcasieu/Cameron Parish Border. His church received damage, but that didn't stop Reverend Taylor.

He immediately opened up the gymnasium and turned it into a massive distribution center for the entire parish. As food, water, clothing and other supplies streamed in, he carved out spaces to house volunteer workers who were coming in to help with recovery efforts. Whenever someone mentioned a need, he said "let's find a way to help."

He mobilized Faithshare Outreach, a food pantry and thrift store run by the church, into a separate non-profit agency so that they could become a go-to place for building supplies and other needs throughout the parish. He was also instrumental in starting the Cameron Unmet Needs Committee to address rebuilding and recovery efforts to bring Cameron Parish residents home.

Reverend Taylor left Cameron Parish in June of 2007 to go to do recovery work in New Orleans.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## Pearl Cole



“Miss Pearl,” as she is affectionately know by everyone in Lake Charles, is the director of Abraham’s Tent Association, a local agency which cooks and serves hot meals daily free of charge. When Lake Charles residents were taking in Hurricane Katrina evacuees, Miss Pearl helped provide extra food for those families who were taking in others.

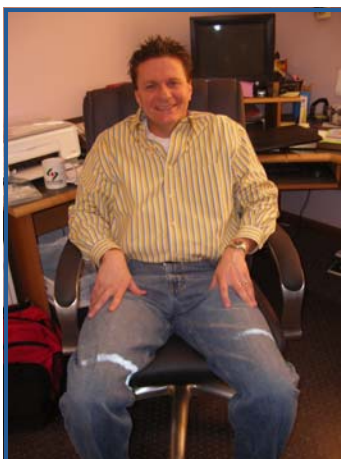
Her compassion for the homeless population that she serves runs deep. When Hurricane Rita was out in the Gulf of Mexico, Miss Pearl began putting together care packages for her homeless clients. She wanted to make sure that if they didn’t evacuate, they would still have something to eat. She lined the hallway with these care packages so that her clients could take them when leaving after lunch.

After Hurricane Rita, Miss Pearl knew that it was important for her hot meals to be served again. She and her family worked tirelessly to be up and running as soon as possible to serve the increased number of homeless and hungry people in the region.

For many years, Miss Pearl has been a hands-on, visible person. Not only does she operate the business side of Abraham’s Tent, you will always find her in the kitchen cooking meals or in the serving line feeding “her people.” You will also find her in the hallway giving words of encouragement, care and love to the folks she serves.

## Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes

## **Reverend Roger Templeton**



Rev. Templeton was pastor of Oak Park United Methodist Church in Lake Charles, which had a predominantly Caucasian congregation. During the storm, an local African American church was severely damaged. Rev. Templeton invited their congregation to share their church until repairs to their church could be completed. They were given office space and storage for important church belongings. The two churches worshipped together.

The small community church of Oak Park UMC soon became a distribution center and housed volunteer teams from around the country. As there were no showers in the church, congregation members opened their homes to meet needs. At the end of every volunteer week, church members cooked gumbo and presented “paper plate awards” – each created by someone whose life was touched in some way by one of the volunteers. Dinner guests shared their stories and many folks who had received help from them came to express their thanks. The volunteer teams visited close to 1,500 properties, completely rebuilt several roofs, assisted in debris removal and performed other jobs that could be done quickly.

From early on, Oak Park UMC was deeply committed and involved in the recovery process. Before the United Methodist Church had established district headquarters in Lake Charles, close to 1,000 homes had received some sort of assistance. This was made possible by emergency grant funding, 500 out-of-state volunteers (including 60 students from a college), and efficient coordination.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## Corinne Pearce



Corinne Pearce continues to make a unique contribution to the recovery effort in Vernon Parish. As Head Librarian of Northwestern State University-Leesville, her involvement as Secretary of Libraries Southwest, the Vernon Parish Community Coalition, CENLA Storytellers Guild, Louisianan Story Telling Association and Vice Chair of the Leesville Planning and Zoning Commission, she has a voice in helping her community continue to thrive. It is also her work on the Vernon Beacon, an electronic newsletter for the Community Coalition, which she hopes will develop into a community-wide newsletter, that enables her to be the “eyes and ears” of her community.

Her role has been to disseminate volumes of information to all parish entities smoothly and effectively, “enabling us to make the unique needs of the community known and to find solutions quickly.” Ms. Pearce speaks of being proud of the way the entire community responded and rose to the challenge presented by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. “A large number of survivors of Hurricane Katrina have decided to remain in our area, and in my estimation that speaks well of our entire community and how effectively we work together.” She quotes Mother Theresa to describe her community’s collaborative efforts, “We do no great things, only small things with great love.”

## Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes



## **Catherine Thomas**



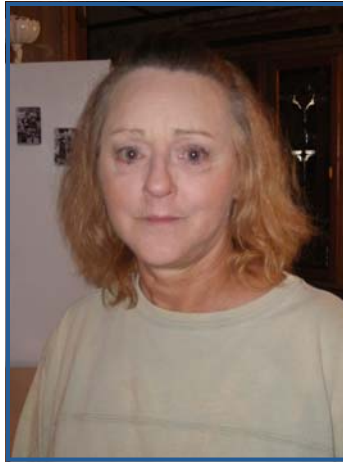
As Hurricane Rita approached Southwest Louisiana, Catherine Thomas, along with several members of her local church, made the decision to stay so they could assist elderly and disabled residents of Lake Charles who could not evacuate.

“When you’re in a disaster, you make the best of it”, says Ms. Thomas. And that’s just what they did. They delivered food and water to elderly and disabled survivors, cooked for anyone who needed it, and identified where survivors were so that patrols could periodically check on them.

Ms. Thomas knew a lot about disasters, having worked for the United Way as National Monitor, whose job was to identify disasters and then notify and coordinate recovery efforts with local United Way Agencies. Her expertise enabled her to organize, unite and maintain the Calcasieu Long Term Recovery group. She also organized the five parishes into Southwest Louisiana U.N.I.T.E.D. (Unmet Needs Initiative To Effect recovery after Disaster).

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## Geraldine S. McDaniel



Geraldine lives in south Lake Charles. Originally a native of Creole in Cameron Parish, she seized the opportunity to help after Hurricane Rita. She decided to have a *Yard Give-Away*. She received local publicity in the newspapers, and supplies started arriving. An elderly couple set up a pipe to hang clothes, and Geraldine established a men's department in her front yard and a shoe department on the fence. "We had stuff everywhere," she said.

She asked people from Cameron to come whether they needed anything or not. On the day of the giveaway, there were emotional reunions among neighbors and friends who hadn't seen each other since the storm. People came, they hugged each other, wept and exchanged phone numbers. Geraldine only gives herself credit for being the parking lot attendant and the bag lady. "These people are the heroes. All I did was throw the party." For a month after the event, she kept a "Rita Bible," her notebook of names and needs, and names of those still willing to donate.

## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes

## **Mae Dell Jackson**



Mrs. Jackson is a senior citizen in DeRidder, and president of the Concerned Citizens group. She worked out of an 18-wheeler following Hurricane Rita, boxing food that was brought into the city and delivering it to survivors who had no means to pick it up themselves.

Mrs. Jackson walks with either a cane or walker, but was determined to help others after the storm. Even before she returned from evacuating, she called everyone she knew who had stayed to check on them. Mrs. Jackson is an unsung hero in the DeRidder community.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Grand Chenier Library Staff** **Beckie Primeaux, Bernice Booth, Kendra Gray & Penny Courville**



This group of Grand Chenier residents has provided an awesome resource for the children of Cameron Parish through their work at the Grand Chenier Library. The small trailer and equipment for the library were donated through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, but the spirit of these ladies could never be donated.

After Hurricane Rita devastated the area, they opened their doors and their hearts to every child who needed them.

The staff at Grand Chenier Library knows and cares about each of the children who attend their programs. They not only care about the children, they care about every resident of Grand Chenier. While they and their families are still in the midst of rebuilding, they always take time to help others in the community.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **June & Mancel Reeves**



This couple from Reeves, Louisiana distributed food and clothing to hurricane survivors beginning in September of 2005, and they continue to do so. From September to December of 2005, they gave out over 100,000 pounds of food. Some food was sent to survivors in Mississippi and to Camp Dry Creek and Camp Pearl. During the evacuation from Hurricane Katrina, they opened the Hope Center in Reeves, as a rest stop and to feed evacuees. They helped many with transportation to the Dry Creek Baptist Camp shelter.

Louisiana Spirit Outreach Workers have called on them many times for resources of food and clothing for survivors they assisted. Although they primarily serve Beauregard Parish, this has never mattered when someone has been in need. June and Mancel are “simple, country folks” with a very warm, welcoming and loving nature.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**



## Sylvia Stelly



Sylvia Stelly moved from New Orleans to Lake Charles in 2003, with her husband, John, and their children. She soon realized that what she missed about big city life was the abundance of multicultural events available. Born in Puerto Rico, Ms. Stelly enjoyed attending events where she could hear the sounds of Latin music. Since there was no such event in Lake Charles, she organized one. The “La Familia Festival” started in September of 2004, as a multicultural, fun-filled free family event. There was lots of good music and activities for families.

In 2005, Lake Charles became the destination for thousands of evacuees from New Orleans escaping Hurricane Katrina. She and her husband hosted about ten family members in their home and helped house about 25 other family and friends in local hotels. Instead of canceling La Familia, since the Lake Charles Civic Center was now a shelter and not available to rent, she and her family saw this as an opportunity to provide a day of fun for the evacuees. They held the festival on the grounds outside the Civic Center and gave evacuees a place to go, at no cost, where they could enjoy bilingual music, a rock wall and pony rides.

She still sees a need to assist the growing Hispanic population in southwest Louisiana, and regularly acts as an interpreter for anyone who needs it. She has assisted survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita with interpretation needs at doctors’ and lawyers’ offices. She has also started “Voice of Liberty,” a non-profit organization that is a resource center for the Hispanic community.

## Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes

## **Sunny King**



Sunny began volunteering her time by assisting hurricane survivors at the Beauregard Area Ministerial Alliance Depot, which was housed in the empty K-Mart building in Deridder. The Depot was originally opened for Hurricane Katrina survivors, but quickly became a Hurricane Rita resource as well. The Depot offered ice, food, clothes, blankets, water, and bedding free to anyone in need.

She then became a case manager for LA United Methodist Disaster Recovery Ministry and began working in the Deridder area helping survivors to rebuild and recover. Sunny was instrumental in helping three families rebuild their damaged homes free of cost. Not only has Sunny helped in these rebuilding efforts, but she has also helped any person that she has come in contact with that needs help.

She is admired and appreciated by the entire community and everyone knows her name. She has been described as being compassionate, selfless, and amazing by members of the community.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Pauline Hurst**



Pauline Hurst and her family left New Orleans as Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on Louisiana. She worked at her church in New Orleans, St. Thomas Missionary Baptist Church, and was friends with members of a sister church in Lake Charles called Greater St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church. She called Pastor Sam Tolbert at Greater St. Mary as Katrina approached and he told them to head for Lake Charles.

What they thought would be a short refuge turned into a life altering change when they came to Lake Charles. Pauline and her family selflessly threw themselves into working with the staff and volunteers at Greater St. Mary to provide food, clothing and shelter to those who needed it.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Melvin Haymon**



“We started and stayed till they stopped coming.” This is how Melvin Haymon described the situation in Leesville during the earliest days after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. “Our neighbors to the north in Vernon Parish were already working hard to find shelter and food for some 300 to 400 survivors of Katrina when Rita hit.” They worked around the clock at The Old Truck Stop, eventually having to move because there were so many people.”

Haymon, a member of the Vernon Parish Police Jury, gives great praise to the Vernon Parish Police Department, the Sheriff’s Department, soldiers of Fort Polk and their families, congregations of many churches and volunteers from the Vernon Parish family who started at 8am each morning and stayed well into the night loading boxes of food and everything necessary for survival during those difficult days. “We had 15 to 20 trucks rolling in with everything from food to ice, coming from every direction. We established a set-up of two to three lines of traffic so that no one had to get out of their cars. It was a great assembly line that stretched bumper to bumper past Fort Polk all the way to Pickering. We even had folks from Texas coming in because east Texas was hit so hard.”

Haymon says it felt good to be able to help and that he and his wife worked long hours along with many others. “We worked until we were exhausted.” Haymon gives praise to the entire community and to the hundreds and hundreds of people who came out even though they had their own problems and families in need.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Vera Abraham**



Vera Abraham and a group of friends saw needs after Hurricane Rita hit southwest Louisiana, and they reached out quickly in Jefferson Davis Parish to help others. Their biggest concern was for the children of the parish, and wanted to help them adjust to changes caused by the storm.

One of the ways they helped was to provide food for the children. They operated a summer feeding program for children who would normally only get to eat at school. To help the children with their emotional needs, Abraham invited Louisiana Spirit to provide group educational services to the children.

Abraham did not just help the children, but also assisted others in the parish whose homes were damaged. She also went to Caring Hands, a multi-assistance agency in Jennings, to get clothing for people who lost theirs in the storm. She truly is a hero for the help she gives to others in her community.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**



## Dinah Landry



Dinah Landry was well known around Cameron Parish for her work as head of the Cameron Council on Aging long before Hurricane Rita hit, so it is no surprise that she was in the middle of evacuation and recovery efforts. What sets Landry apart from others is how she turned her extraordinary compassion and love for animals into becoming the caretaker for dozens of pets during the evacuation of Cameron Parish.

Landry is the owner of 27 pets, from cats and dogs to miniature goats and Belgian Draft horses. When it became apparent that Hurricane Rita would strike Cameron Parish, Landry published her cell phone number in the *American Press* newspaper in case people had animals to evacuate that they couldn't take. People began to drop off animals to her, and the dog catcher picked up strays and delivered them to her. She ended up with about 35 dogs (one pregnant who had puppies) and about two dozen cats and kittens, in addition to her own animals.

She said she wouldn't have been able to do it without help from Dr. Robert Lofton from University Animal Clinic. He connected her with the Veterinary Association which donated over a truckload of supplies such as food, collars, leashes and cages. Pat Jones, Director of Allen Council on Aging, was her port in the storm. "She took us all in and provided for us. We did well and we all came home," said Landry.

When they returned, they found more animals that rode out the storm. "We found one dog that rode out the hurricane on the roof of a house. "We also found kittens inside of a roof that was torn apart from a house."

She found homes for all of the pets when they returned, some with original owners, and some with new homes. Some animals went home with out-of-state workers who came in to help with recovery.

## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes

## **Larry Benton**



Larry Benton was chosen by FEMA to manage Crying Eagle Village, the largest transitional living community in Southwest Louisiana. His passion and dedication, however, go far beyond his duties as park manager. He is always available to help residents with solving problems. He listens closely and takes his time to see if there is anything he can do to make their lives better.

He quickly recognized the need for children to have assistance at the park. Since a playground area had not been created, he gave strong support and encouragement to the Louisiana Spirit Children's Team to provide a weekly program called "Kid's Reach." The children love "Mr. Larry," as they affectionately call him. He comes to the field to check on them and ends up chatting, hugging, and listening to their daily news – even jumping rope with them.

He has been a positive role model that so many of these children need. He is able to keep the park in control by maintaining strict rules and regulations, but he also shows park residents love, compassion and respect. By going beyond his job description, he is an unsung hero to many.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Pastor Michael “Mike” Paxton**



Michael “Mike” Paxton is pastor of First “The Dwelling Place.”

Baptist Church in Kinder, LA, known as

Kinder First Baptist quickly filled up with survivors from New Orleans, then days later with people from Southwest Louisiana. Mike and other church members quickly realized they had to do something, so they called a community meeting and invited local pastors, Chamber of Commerce members, and bankers. They knew housing was not a problem in Allen Parish because of the number of hotels for the casino, so they decided they would feed the people to help them save money for necessities.

Mike volunteered First Baptist Church as a location to feed survivors who came through Kinder. A few days after Katrina, they were feeding 1,500 people per day. The crowds grew so large that the church had to remove the pews in their sanctuary to make room for everyone to sit and eat. By the time Rita came, they were feeding approximately 5,000 people per day. Overall, it was estimated they prepared 85,000 meals after the Katrina and Rita disasters. Other local churches of all denominations quickly joined the effort by offering to take cooking shifts. Mike said it was a huge community effort, but they had fun doing it.

Besides cooking for survivors, they also assisted them with anything they could, such as FEMA registration, Social Security issues, unemployment problems, VA benefits, insurance information, locating housing, and in contacting friends and family members. They set up an information center. Some church members even adopted survivors until they could find a place to stay. Kinder First Baptist also housed 34 Red Cross Volunteers and 30 to 40 Disaster Relief Workers during Hurricane Rita recovery efforts.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Church of God in Christ, Mennonite Southern Magnolia Congregation**



The Church of God in Christ, a Mennonite church referred to as Magnolia, is full of Unsung Heroes who are too modest to be recognized for their efforts individually. The church members were a huge help to the community of DeRidder following the Hurricane Rita disaster.

The church would meet and discuss the needs they had come across within their community, and what they could do. Members of the church did whatever was needed, from removing trees in yards and on roadways, to cleaning flooded homes so families could move back in, and helping to clear fallen limbs and trees from power lines so the electric company could restore power back to the community.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Virginia Iles**



Virginia Iles is an Administrative Assistant for Warren United Methodist Church. Hurricane Rita destroyed her church. Oak Park Methodist Church invited the members of her church to worship and work together. They worked tirelessly to assist church members and the community by preparing and delivering 80 –200 boxes per day; collecting and distributing clothes, coats and shoes, food, water, bleach and diapers. Special attention was paid to the older and housebound church members and their work included repairing and remodeling homes.

Virginia said, “I love to move and so this was an exciting time to be of help and to be of service.” She concludes that they are continuing to look for a site for Warren Methodist Church, but in the meantime she has included in her duties coordinating all of the volunteers for Oak Park Methodist.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**



## **Carl Evans Broussard**



In 12 years as Cameron Parish Clerk of Court, Carl Broussard has been the caretaker of public records and Chief Elections Officer. After Hurricane Rita, Broussard stepped up and organized the re-opening of the entire courthouse system. He also worked with survivors to resolve insurance and housing concerns.

Immediately after Rita, the courthouse was basically out of business. Broussard worked out of his car. He also assisted in re-opening the Tax Assessor and Tax collector offices. He took it upon himself to get electricity restored in the courthouse. This required countless phone calls, meetings and much determination to get it done. Re-opening the courthouse gave survivors a sense of hope that they too could recover. His tireless efforts also allowed the 38<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Court to reopen.

Broussard worked tirelessly with survivors to resolve insurance claims. He understood the people of Cameron Parish and fought on their behalf to make sure property values were assessed accurately. He relentlessly lobbied government agencies to make sure survivors were treated fairly.

Calling himself “the pest from the west,” Broussard has been recognized as “a diligent champion of the people.”

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Jorry Dyer**



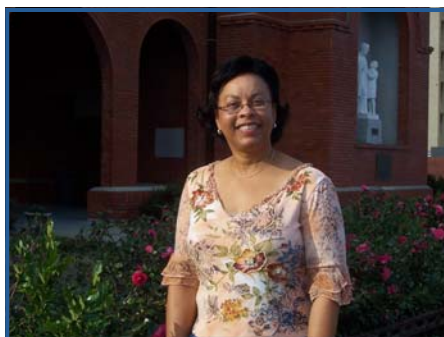
Mrs. Jorry Dyer is a resident of Oakdale, and has been a Red Cross volunteer for over 10 years. She volunteered during Hurricane Rita, staffing the information center at a local shelter. Dyer helped survivors with directions to other shelters, and later helped with supply distribution when supplies arrived.

The Red Cross shelter manager told us that even after Dyer finished her duties, she still came to volunteer and worked without a designated workplace. Dyer worked for 12 to 16 hours each day for weeks after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Dyer is disabled, confined to a wheelchair or walker at all times, but still found the strength and heart to get out and help survivors in her area. Dyer is also a volunteer with her local fire department for house fires, helping the victims to be informed of local stores where they can receive help. She told us, "I love what I do."

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## Talita Allison



As Hurricane Katrina approached, Talita Allison “took charge” and led her family, her siblings and their children, her 74-year-old mother, and two out-of-state friends safely out of New Orleans. In all, there were 16 evacuees leaving in a caravan of five vehicles. Before they left, she made sure everyone collected their important documents, certificates and cherished photographs.

Without her husband, Warren, whose job with Entergy required that he stay behind, Talita and her family made their way to Lake Charles, where she had arranged to stay with a family friend. As they left the city, being the oldest sibling she remembers feeling “a strange rush, like salvation, as I was making the way to keep the family safe.”

Once in Lake Charles, Talita worked tirelessly to make sure everyone had the essentials they needed to survive. She used what money she had to buy food, medicine, diapers, clothing...whatever anyone needed. She worked into the night calling FEMA until everyone had an I.D. number. She waited in long lines for hours to receive free clothing and other services such as food stamps, Red Cross assistance, and social services assistance for her blind brother and sister.

Talita’s work was not just for her own family. She helped the staff at the food stamp office in Lake Charles when they were overwhelmed with assisting New Orleans evacuees. She assisted survivors in completing their paperwork.

Talita also enrolled her daughter, a freshman who at Xavier University, at UL-Lafayette and her other daughter in St. Louis High in Lake Charles. She leased an apartment for everyone and bought used furniture and beds so everyone would be comfortable.

As one sibling put it, “Talita was our strength and hope. She made us laugh when we wanted to cry. We lost everything, but the closeness we shared will never be forgotten.” Talita moved back to New Orleans and continues to assist family and friends rebuild their lives and her hometown.

## Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes

## Donald Springfield



Donald Springfield is known as “Chicken Man” to his friends and riders. He drove the *LA Moves* bus service from Crying Eagle Village and other places in Lake Charles after Hurricane Rita.

During the last days of the bus run, Mr. Springfield gave each rider a letter stating:

“We have put many miles on the buses I have driven since I started. There were good days, and bad days, but I feel together we rode this bus as a family. We were different colors, backgrounds, but rode the bus as one big family. I would like to take this time to thank each and every one for your help in trying to keep me and the bus going. I would like to wish each and every one the very best in the years ahead. I will not forget all the ones I have met. Take care and God bless and be with you all. With love to all my new brothers and sisters, Donald Springfield, Chicken Man.”

## Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes

## **Faithshare Staff**

### **Irma Breaux, Sharon Dubard & Judy Willis**



Faithshare Outreach started as a dream of Reverend Wayne Taylor of Sweetlake United Methodist Church. He wanted part of the church's mission to be to provide ambulatory equipment to the elderly and disabled in the community, and as people no longer needed the equipment, they would return it to be redistributed to others in need. The program evolved into providing for many other needs such as food and clothing, and Faithshare operated a small thrift store. All that changed when Hurricane Rita ripped the roof off of the building. Volunteers went to work fixing the small building and installed a "Rita Roof," a blue metal roof to remind them of all the blue roofs after the hurricane.

Before stores and businesses were opened back up after the storm, Faithshare became the center of the community by providing food, water and other necessary supplies. The closest stores were a half-hour drive away. When it became evident that the primary need of the community would be to rebuild homes and furnish them, Faithshare became a separate non-profit from the church so that they could get grants for building supplies.

Three ladies operate Faithshare now, Sharon Dubard, Irma Breaux and Judy Willis. Sharon had been a volunteer with the store before Hurricane Rita and said that they helped 99 families who were Katrina survivors. Her home of 34 years in Grand Lake sustained wind damage and 36 inches of marsh water inside during Rita. Her neighbors recommended she bulldoze it and start over. Volunteers from out-of-state went to work on her home, and she was able to move back one year later.

Irma Breaux's mother worked as a volunteer with Faithshare before the storm and Irma worked as the bookkeeper at Sweetlake UMC. When they started having to really track donations and building supplies, Irma became a part of Faithshare too. She said, "Working at Faithshare, we get to hear all the stories. When the elderly people come in, they just need someone to talk to. Sometimes it's sad, but we hug them and cry with them."

Judy Willis lived in Cameron along the coast when the storm hit. At the time, she was working in the ice house providing ice to fishermen. She lost her home in Cameron. She and her husband now live in Grand Lake. "If it wouldn't have been for Rita, I would never have met Irma and Sharon. God has a purpose for all this."

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**



## Barbara Cahee



“I knew I was in trouble when I saw  
air.” Those were the words that

my metal building go flying through the

Barbara Cahee said her neighbor used to describe what it was like staying during Hurricane Rita. Another said, “I could hear each individual nail popping out of my roof.” Barbara lives in Mossville and many of her neighbors range in age from 70 to over 90. When she returned after the storm, Barbara began checking on her elderly neighbors and found that many had not evacuated. All remember being frightened and will never forget. She ministered to them and to the substance abuse community by bringing food, water and ice, along with support and comforting words.

Barbara is the Volunteer Coordinator for the Rape Crisis Outreach Sexual Assault Program of Calcasieu Women’s Shelter. She says that hearing these stories validates the importance of responding to mandatory evacuation orders. “We must all be aware of our elderly neighbors during times like these.” Barbara understands the importance of identifying and assisting our elders to evacuate in a disaster and says her community now has a database of elderly citizens who will need assistance in an emergency.

## Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes



## **Robert A. “Bobby” Smith**



Robert “Bobby” Smith, is a retired carpenter who volunteers alongside Sunny King and other Beauregard Parish volunteers. After the storm, Bobby volunteered his time by sketching blueprints for homes to be built by the Louisiana United Methodist Disaster Recovery Ministry in the Beauregard parish area. When complete, he sent the sketches to H&R Drafting, a local business in DeRidder, where they were put to scale free of charge.

Material lists and cost estimates were also provided at no charge by Graphic Home Designs in DeRidder. They are currently working on the third home, which should be completed by the end of the year. In addition to sketching blue prints, he coordinated workdays for the rebuilding projects, helped to get volunteers, and actually donated his carpentry skills to help rebuild the homes.

Sunny King said she “couldn’t have done her job without Mr. Smith.” He is recognized as an upstanding member of the community and was recently named Grand Marshall of the Beauregard Parish Fair parade for all his contributions to the community.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Margaret Jackson**



When Hurricane Katrina came ashore in New Orleans and survivors started coming to Lake Charles, Margaret Jackson was busy working to provide food, clothing, blankets, washing powder, water, and more to evacuees that came to her church, Seventh Day Adventists. (She is pictured on the left alongside Joyce Easton, another volunteer.)

The church suffered severe damage during Hurricane Rita, so she and other volunteers hauled the supplies out of the building. They sat outside and continued their service work. It was very hot during this time, and for several weeks afterward, as they continued to work outdoors assisting survivors. After a while, some of the church members got together and cleaned out a building in the back and continued to work from there.

Margaret and other volunteers sat quietly in the back of the church feeding approximately 140 families a month. Survivors were welcome to come for food once a week, but they would never turn someone away if they needed more. They asked survivors to show identification, but if someone had none they considered the act of showing up for assistance identification enough.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Adrian Hunt**



Adrian Hunt of Iota is a retired power company employee and has worked all over the country. After Hurricane Rita, he was quick to help out his neighbors.

Ms. Hubertina, a disabled neighbor, had big limbs down on her fences and blocking her driveway. Hunt sprung into action, fired up his chainsaw and removed all of the debris, by himself. His neighbors directly behind him, also had so much debris in their yard that they could not get their car out, so he again spent hours and days removing the debris.

Hunt also had damage and debris in his yard, but he said “mine can wait.” These are just some of the people he helped for days and weeks after the storm.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## Staff of Greater St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church



from the left are  
Rose Davis,

Portia Young, Linda Daniels and Oliver Remo.



Pictured  
Charles Jones,

Pictured from the left are Evelyn Williams, Herman Curry  
and Cynthia Jones.

During and after Hurricane Rita, staff and volunteers at Greater St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church, in north Lake Charles, were there to help people physically and spiritually. Survivors were in distress when they came to the staff at the church distribution center. They got more than food, clothing and toiletries. They got a caring group of people who would pray with them.

Louisiana Spirit found a community partner in the staff of the church. Many times, Louisiana Spirit staff sent survivors without appointments or calling ahead, and the staff of Greater St. Mary assisted them and treated them with dignity and respect.

The staff at Greater St. Mary's is the true definition of give – give – give!!!

## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes

## Larry Smith



During and after Hurricane Rita, Larry housed a family of six survivors at his home in Moss Bluff. Five of them stayed for two weeks, and one of them had just undergone back surgery prior to the storm and was transported by ambulance to a hospital in Shreveport. Larry used the food in his freezer to feed himself and the family for two weeks. They had no electricity, but as soon as the local hardware store opened, he bought a generator to keep the refrigerator operating.

Larry went to Westlake and tarped the roofs of three homes. One of the homes belonged to a lineman for Beauregard Electric who was in Deridder working to restore power there. Larry went every day to tend to the man's animals.

He transported a generator to a home in Westlake where families of police officers were staying, because they could not move the generator with their car. These survivors were complete strangers.

In checking a neighbor's house, he found a very frightened horse in the swimming pool and worked for a couple of hours to calm and rescue the horse.

He's called "the boy scout," as he was prepared for the hurricane and was prepared to help others in need. Larry is very modest and says, "I didn't do anything. People needed help and I helped. A ton of people did things for other people. I did not go out of my way to do anything."

## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes



## **The Hitchens Family**



Sheldon Hitchens, his wife, Sharon, and son, Ryan, live in DeRidder, LA. They opened their hearts and their home after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans.

Their neighbor took in many survivors from Hurricane Katrina. So many that his house was literally overflowing with people. The Hitchens took three of the survivors into their home to help the neighbor out. They were strangers, but the Hitchens knew they were desperate and they had bedrooms to spare. The survivors stayed in their home for 3 to 4 months.

When Rita hit, the Hitchens again opened their home to those in need. This time, seven local families moved in. Sheldon said they worked as a family to support each other in every way possible, so everyone there was a hero in his eyes. Some of these families stayed with the Hitchens for up to two weeks.

When asked why he did what he did, Sheldon said, “As a person, a child of God, it felt like a duty. It was an honor to do what any person that loves people would do. They were the heroes.” He also said that he couldn’t have done it without his wife and son.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**



## **Pastor Mona Lisa Garrett**



Pastor Mona Lisa Garrett was new at her church in Lake Charles, First Christian Church, in 2005. Mona Lisa's arrival is described by a member of her congregation as, "If a breath of fresh air had drifted in. She was joyful and filled with a spirit of enthusiasm." When Hurricane Rita struck, she quickly pushed her congregation into action and outreach well beyond their usual community involvement. They housed and organized volunteers from around the country to work on the homes of the elderly and disabled. "She put our small church in a position to do a great amount of good for the community. She encouraged and led our congregation in a great sense of revival as we experienced the joy of recovery and helping others," said another member of the congregation.

She immediately set up a food and cleaning supply distribution center in their parish hall. Mona Lisa also saw a need to help the elderly in the area. She facilitated a support group of elderly women called "Steel Magnolias" and asked Louisiana Spirit to assist with the emotional needs of the group.

Seeing a large mental health need in the community, she helped Louisiana Spirit by organizing and sponsoring a "Good Grief Rita," support group to help individuals who had suffered loss due to the hurricane.

Mona Lisa's involvement and support after Hurricane Rita has made a huge impact on the Lake Charles community.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Teddy Broussard**



St. Eugene Catholic Church in Grand Chenier took in 15 to 20 feet of water during Hurricane Rita. While the altar, pews, and several gravesites washed away into the marsh, the spirit of the congregation remained. When they returned, they found that they still had the walls and roof to the main church building. They saw this as a sign from God that they should rebuild.

Teddy and other members of the congregation didn't wait around for government assistance. They were busy working to salvage what they could of the building for use as a donation and distribution center for survivors returning to rebuild. Teddy was instrumental in organizing donations and volunteers. . Father Vincent began conducting mass as soon as was possible, with an altar composed of a table cloth covering a board on cinderblocks.

After two years, the main church building is completely rebuilt and open for regular services thanks to the tenacity of Teddy and other determined church members.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Bamela Brown**



Bamela Brown was fortunate to receive a new home through UMCOR and BAMA (Beauregard Area Ministerial Alliance) following Hurricane Rita. After moving in, Ms. Brown felt so grateful that she opened her doors to others who needed temporary shelter.

Her nephew and his mother moved in with her. When his mother found a place of her own, Brown continued to have the child live with her because she had the room to do so. The generosity she received has been returned to the community through her hospitality toward others.

Brown said, “It’s comfortable to be able to sit and not worry about things. I’ve been blessed.” She said her new home has made her feel so much better that she now feels she can work again.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **The Fat Boys**

### **Keith Jagneaux, Leo Reddock & Richard Cole**



“The Fat Boys”, as they are called, know a lot about food and helping people. This was never more evident than in the days and weeks following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Two days before Katrina hit, the Lake Charles Civic Center began gearing up to host evacuees. The Red Cross began searching for someone locally who could organize and prepare food for an expected 600 to 1000 people. Richard Cole, Leo Reddock and Keith Jagneaux accepted the challenge. They had done this before, so they immediately began networking, calling local restaurants and business people to ask for assistance. Leo organized a food and dry goods warehouse to receive, store and refrigerate goods. He said they did not lose any food and “the community was giving whatever we asked for. I don’t remember one ‘no’ from anyone.” In all, they spent 14 to 17 hours a day there for about three weeks and fed 4,500 to 5,000 evacuees. Pictured above from the left are Keith, Leo, a volunteer and Richard at the shelter.

When evacuation for Rita was ordered, Richard, Leo and Keith waited until the last minute to leave, making sure the food they had accumulated could be salvaged and safely stored. They evacuated with first responders to Kinder and returned 5-6 hours after the storm. “We cut our way back into town as power lines and trees were down.” The storm hit at 2 a.m., and by noon they had hot gumbo for fire, police and rescue workers. “The Fat Boys” lived at the Civic Center for 3 ½ months, all the while dealing with their own losses and making sure their families were safe.

Richard, Leo and Keith endured tough conditions at the Civic Center, as there was no air conditioning in 104 degree heat, and no bathing facilities. While suffering through their own personal losses, their strong sense of community involvement enabled them to give of themselves in ways you don’t see every day.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## Reverend Neil and Mary Early



Neil and Mary Early were at the forefront in assisting survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Neil is pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Leesville. Their community activism reaches from the Leesville Area Ministerial Alliance to the Vernon Parish Community Coalition and the VFW. It is no small wonder they worked as a team to serve the community during the trying days and weeks after the storms.

Reverend Early says that the real unsung heroes are the many people in the various churches who prepared meals day after day for over a month. “Our men and women were fixing large quantity meals to take to the shelters.” He praises his wife Mary for doing some major shopping, “You should have seen Mary as she shopped for multiple evacuation centers.” Mary and Neil spent countless hours checking on people and assisting survivors in locating services. They even went from shelter to shelter performing puppetry skits for children and the “young at heart.”

When Reverend Early outlines a typical day after the hurricanes, he credits Mary, Melvin Haymon and Pastor Maurice Johnson with doing “amazing jobs.” “We started every day before 7am at the Fair Grounds with a review of the day before and laid plans for the current day; loading, sorting and delivering; taking what we saw and heard to use for the next day’s plans, trying to provide relief.” Mary and Reverend Neil gave an astounding statistic: Vernon Parish has a total population of only 48,000 yet they provided a safe haven for over 10,000 survivors of both Katrina and Rita. Reverend Early used the word, “PAX”, and that is what they did, providing “PEACE” during troubling times.

## Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes



## **Reverend Samuel C. Tolbert, Jr.**



The Sunday before Hurricane Katrina came ashore, Lake Charles became the destination of thousands of New Orleans area evacuees. Reverend Tolbert, pastor of Greater St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church, and his congregation began feeding evacuees three times a day. The following week, survivors were housed at the church and at other affiliated churches.

Reverend Tolbert organized a food pantry, and the distributions and assistance grew from there. He invited Pauline Hurst and her family to evacuate to Greater St. Mary from their sister church in New Orleans, St. Thomas Missionary Baptist Church. They helped Reverend Tolbert and the congregation to run the distribution center.

Reverend Tolbert has always been a caring person involved in his community. It is not surprising that he is at the heart of the many wonderful things that take place at Greater St. Mary Church.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**



## **Reverend James Moore**



Reverend Moore came to Cameron Parish in 2006 to assist in recovery efforts after Hurricane Rita hit. He did not let the overwhelming task of recovery be an obstacle in his ministry, he made it an opportunity to bring people together and become a stronger community.

Grand Chenier United Methodist is a small church located in the southern part of Cameron Parish near the coast. It took a tremendous blow from the storm. In the end, the church building was renovated thanks to the hard work of Reverend Moore and others in his congregation. They organized different groups of volunteers and rebuilt the structure.

Reverend Moore then opened the church building to Louisiana Spirit to hold group meetings and individual counseling sessions. “It was so important for us to have a facility to meet in since there is really no other large meeting space in the Grand Chenier area.”

His work continues in efforts to rebuild Wakefield United Methodist Church in Cameron. It suffered almost complete destruction in the hurricane, and only part of the roof and supports remain. With hard work and encouragement, Reverend Moore leads both congregations as they rebuild their homes, churches and lives.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## Lisa Toney



Lisa Toney is a postal worker fought to keep the Singer Post Office open after the building sustained severe roof damage during Hurricane Rita.

in Singer, Louisiana. She

Toney said the government intended to shut the post office down because no one was able to deliver, due to the damages. She was able to move the post office into a building that also houses the library and began delivering mail out of this location. She gave credit to the community for all of their help in the moving effort. Toney said she made a call for help and people showed up with trucks and trailers.

Six weeks later, she was again told the post office would be closed, this time due to lack of security at their current location. Toney quickly called the postal service headquarters and requested a portable trailer be put on property donated by a local family. The “portable post office” was delivered to the property and Toney was able to deliver mail out of a secured, legal establishment and maintain an open, working post office.

Toney has worked for the postal service for 27 years and is a friendly face to meet. She said some towns lose domain of their zip codes when they lose their post office, property values decrease, and it is even difficult to keep a school open. Toney, through all of her hard work and determination, helped Singer to maintain its’ identity as a town.

## Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes

## **Arthur Booth**



Arthur and Bernice Booth, of Grand Chenier, lost their home during Hurricane Rita. It floated away into the marsh. Upon returning by boat after the storm, he found his home, but it was completely destroyed, so he began cleaning up his and his neighbors' properties.

He also worked tirelessly to rebuild his church, St. Eugene Catholic Church. Arthur had always taken care of the cemetery at St. Eugene's, so after the hurricane had damaged so many of the gravesites, his intimate knowledge of the cemetery was vital to its restoration.

Arthur copes with his losses by staying busy and helping others. With tears in his eyes, Arthur says that after the hurricane, Grand Chenier lost many good people. His love and respect for his community is evident when he says, "This is home, I wouldn't live anywhere else."

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Felicia Charles**



Felicia Charles and her husband opened their Deridder home to their entire family following Hurricane Katrina. They welcomed 16 survivors into their three-bedroom home.

When Hurricane Rita threatened the area a few weeks later, Felicia could not convince her family to evacuate because of the trauma they experienced with Katrina. They rode out the storm in Deridder. Most of her family moved on a couple of months later, but two family members still reside with her and her husband.

Felicia said the community was such a great help to her following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The local VFW helped out with food for her houseguests, and neighbors and fellow church members brought clothing and food as well. When asked if there was enough room for all of her family, Felicia said, “as long as there’s a floor, there’s room.”

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Brent Sarvunt**



Brent Sarvunt is a firefighter from Lake Charles who, in addition to his duties as a first responder, gave of his own time to help survivors in need.

After Hurricane Katrina, he volunteered on his days off to work at the Lake Charles Civic Center serving lunch and dinner to evacuees.

After Hurricane Rita, when other first responders couldn't repair their own roofs, Mr. Sarvunt and a small crew did the work for them. He went to Vinton for one week to clear trees and debris from families' homes who couldn't afford to pay laborers.

For twenty days, he volunteered to stay in Camp Cameron, a tent city established in Cameron Parish after Hurricane Rita leveled almost all of the structures in the area.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Pastor Austin Spell**



Austin Spell is Pastor of Victory Gospel Lighthouse Church in Jennings. He is also a retired contractor. He likes to help anyone in need.

Immediately after Hurricane Rita, he hooked up his flatbed trailer and started hauling off debris for people who had no way to get it moved. He organized and distributed food to those who had no refrigeration and to those who could not leave their homes. “For months after the storm, I’ve witnessed him helping survivors who had damages without charging them a penny, just because it was the right thing to do,” said a Louisiana Spirit Outreach Worker.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**



## **Charles R. Guillory**



Among his peers, Charles Guillory is considered to be a kind, giving person. He is selfless with his time and always willing to lend a helping hand.

When he returned to Lake Charles after Hurricane Rita, Guillory immediately began to help his neighbors with whatever they needed. He fed two families who had nothing with food from his own freezer. He also helped clear debris from neighboring yards for weeks after the storm.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Linda Chevallier**



As a nurse in the rural health clinic, Linda Chevallier tends to more than just the medical needs of residents and survivors in Grand Lake. She has displayed a love, commitment and dedication to her community that is tremendous.

Linda and her family lost everything in Hurricane Rita, as did most everyone in Cameron Parish. Her help at the clinic provided a “safe” place for people to come for help. They trusted her, talked to her and cried with her - especially men. She was the emotional glue that helped them transition past the hurricane and continue on.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Chef Bobby Judd**



Chef Judd is the author of Cajun Sampler, so he knows his way around a Cajun kitchen. As an internationally trained chef, he jumped at the opportunity to help prepare meals for the 6,000 people taking shelter at the Lake Charles Civic Center after Hurricane Katrina.

Two groups of volunteers had traveled to the Lake Charles area to offer their services by cooking for the large crowd. Chef Judd “educated” them on Cajun cooking, and helped them to understand the importance of seasonings to the Cajun palate.

Chef Judd also spends his time advocating for senior’s rights. His next cookbook, Cajun Sampler Second Helping, is currently being published.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## Linda Ceaser & AmeriCorps



Pictured from the left are Lane Per-

Cuba, Linda Ceaser and Tate Townsend

kins, Gaynell LeBlanc, Michael

When Hurricane Katrina hit, Linda Ceasar had just assumed responsibility for the AmeriCorps Volunteers in Lake Charles for the *Impact Lake Charles* program. Their mission was specifically to help with after school programs and activities. When the Lake Charles Civic Center became a shelter for about 5,000 people, they began lending their services at the Civic Center.

Soon after, Hurricane Rita made a direct hit on southwest Louisiana, and the demand for the AmeriCorps volunteers grew. The *Impact Lake Charles* group worked on 75 other projects in 2005, including handing out clean-up supplies in Cameron Parish, taking applications for Red Cross assistance, working at Burton Coliseum and Civic Center shelters, and even working on home repairs.

Linda saw a need for more than her small group of local volunteers, so she wrote a grant for four more AmeriCorps teams to come in from out-of-state to help with needs assessment and recovery and clean-up efforts. Linda worked tirelessly, even after hours, to see to the needs of all her special volunteers. She made sure they were all taken care of and made to feel welcome.

## Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes

## **Reverend Brian Wells**



“We assisted 517 people after Hurricane Katrina in our Family Life Center,” said Reverend Brian Wells of the First Baptist Church of Jennings. He is the Minister of Education at the church, and went to work with other members of the congregation and 150 community volunteers to help provide survivors with basic needs.

When it became evident that the evacuation from New Orleans would be long-term, they focused on reuniting families. They assisted with relocating family members with their loved ones in other states, which involved providing airline tickets, bus tickets and travel expenses.

A few families chose to stay in Jefferson Davis Parish after the hurricane, and Reverend Wells assisted them with finding housing and other goods including furniture and clothing. “Most of the families we helped were from the New Orleans area and Mobile Bay in Mississippi, but two families remain here in Jennings,” said Reverend Wells.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Paula Rose**



Paula Rose works for Singer Waterworks and is a member of the Singer Volunteer Fire Department. She and her husband returned to Singer one day after Hurricane Rita to find their home totally destroyed. Suffering from their own significant losses, Paula and her husband were somehow able to open their hearts to the community of Singer.

Paula and other members of the Volunteer Fire Department cleaned out their freezers and quickly gave away food to fellow survivors before it spoiled. For six weeks following Hurricane Rita, Paula and other volunteer fire fighters worked 16 to 20 hour days helping survivors in their community. Not only did they help with getting disaster relief trucks into their community to deliver food and water, but they also had to answer emergency phone calls from the 911 system.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**



## **Noelie McDaniel**



Noelie McDaniel did not sustain a great deal of damage from Hurricane Rita, but gave generously of what she had to a group of some 30 people who found their way to her home.

She told a wonderful story of “putting it all together” in her largest Magnalite cooker to create a delicious sauce piquant for a large group of people from her husband’s business partner’s church in DeQuincy, who fled Hurricane Rita at the last minute. She said, “God gave me so much and I shared it.” She bakes and cooks for everyone. McDaniel said, “I had on hand six dozen eggs and boxes of grits. We had plenty of frozen vegetables in the freezer along with Axis Deer (a trophy deer), beef, tasso and ham. I had three rice cookers going at the same time.”

McDaniel’s guests were gone in 36 hours, but it was a time in which the richness of the region was shared for a brief moment, one of those wonderful moments of people helping one another in a difficult time.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Letha Keyes**



Letha Keyes is the Office Manager of Quiet Oaks R.V. Park in Fenton. After the hurricanes, many survivors living in FEMA trailers had no transportation. Keyes picked up and delivered supplies for survivors in the park and helped transport them to the doctor and grocery store. She considers the survivors her neighbors.

Keyes offered to Louisiana Spirit use of the park community building for a hurricane recovery support group which lasted seven weeks. “Many times she would drive about a half hour out of her way to open the building, making sure it was cleaned up and ready for our groups,” said one Louisiana Spirit outreach worker.

She also offered the building for others living in and outside of her park. She always made sure it was unlocked and stocked with coffee. She had parties for the children who were living in FEMA trailers.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Darlene Dyson**



Darlene Dyson is a member of a true “seafood family.” She shrimps, crabs and harvests oysters in Cameron Parish. Her home and seafood business were completely wiped out by Hurricane Rita, but she soon returned. Dyson was instrumental, along with her extended family, in re-starting the seafood business in lower Cameron Parish.

Dyson has strong spirit and a “can-do” attitude which shows as she raises her son, Paul. She is strong-willed and stubborn, but these traits have brought her through this tragedy and have helped her in rebuilding a community and business that is a vital part of Louisiana.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **The Volunteers**



Clean-up, recovery and rebuilding efforts in southwest Louisiana would have been impossible without the thousands of volunteers who came from out-of-state to help. At first, they slept in church hallways, private homes, cars and tents. To meet the need of housing volunteers, the United Way and local government worked together to refurbish a closed middle school building, which is now the SWLA Volunteer Housing and Coordination Center. The facility can house up to 200 volunteers at a time.

Thousands of volunteers worked many hours to help communities in southwest Louisiana. One volunteer project, “Alternative Spring Break,” ran from February 16 through April 3, 2007, as a way for college students to perform service projects instead of partying during their break from classes. During this period, over 27,000 volunteer hours of service, valued at \$1,000,000, was performed. The volunteers were housed at the Volunteer Housing and Coordination Center and at several local churches.

Another volunteer project brought in graduate students from Dominican University Graduate School of Social Work, who worked alongside Louisiana Spirit staff to assist in outreach efforts. They worked on other community recovery projects as well. The photo above shows the group after repairing a room damaged by the wind and rain of Hurricane Rita.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## **Legare Clement**



After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Crying Eagle Village, a 500-unit trailer park, was opened to house survivors and evacuees who had lost their homes. Legare Clement, Executive Director of the Calcasieu Area Council of Boy Scouts of America, recognized a need among young boys living there. They needed role models and positive reinforcement.

Legare had no connection to these boys except a desire to see their lives improve now and into the future. He decided to start a Boy Scout troop for them, and he would be their troop leader. He began spending a lot of time with the boys, taking them on overnight adventures and weekend camping trips.

Legare's work has made a huge impact. The boys now know someone cares about their well-being.

Legare saw a need in the community and met that need in a great way.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Natha Gant**



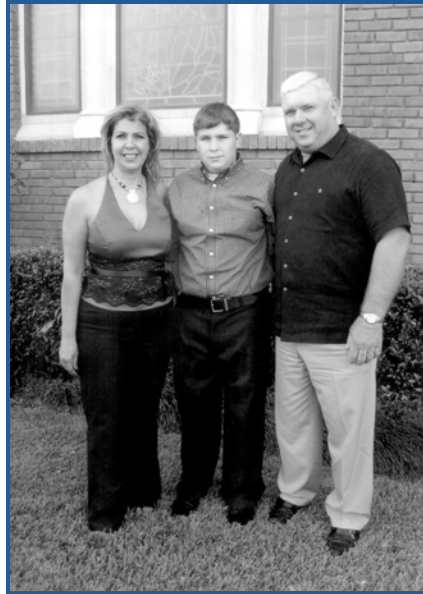
“She went out of her way to be a resource person for people at the Deridder Disaster Recovery Center right after the hurricanes hit,” said a Louisiana Spirit Counselor. Natha Gant works for the Beauregard Office of Mental Health, and when they were no longer able to take any new cases, she helped people in need of mental health services find providers and physicians in private practice to take their cases at little or no charge. She also helped people find housing and transportation when both were scarce.

“I’m not a hero, that’s just what I do as a part of who I am,” said Gant. The people of Beauregard Parish are grateful that they can claim her as a friend, neighbor and hero.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**



## **Shane and Tammie Conner**



Shane and Tammie Conner donated some of their property in Grand Lake so that trailers could be brought in to house evacuees and survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This was extremely generous of the Conners, as they too were dealing with personal losses from Hurricane Rita.

The Conners also donated the land in front of their home (pictured above) for use by Louisiana Spirit to conduct group sessions and recreational activities for children.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Norbert Clemens**



After Hurricane Katrina, many evacuees living in shelters were desperately searching for almost non-existent rental property to house their families. One family of ten especially needed a place to call home and went to a Lake Charles real estate office for help.

Upon hearing of their plight, Norbert, a real estate agent, immediately went to work to see if he could help. He knew of a vacant listing and called the home owner. Norbert was able to put this family into the fully-furnished home RENT FREE!

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**

## **Karl Bruce**



After Hurricane Katrina, Mr. Bruce organized a group of people to serve hot meals to evacuees living in motels in Calcasieu Parish. He said, “There was a need and we felt we could help.”

Karl did not evacuate from Hurricane Rita. After the storm, he went to homes and businesses trying to secure people’s belongings. He used tin and wood to close holes in roofs throughout Calcasieu Parish for people who could not return home.

## **Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes**

## Jerome Ringo



Jerome Ringo, a retired operator from one of the local plants, had just completed his term as Chairman of the National Wildlife Federation when Hurricane Katrina hit. The phone calls started pouring in, inquiring about his health and safety. Because many knew he lived near the hurricane sight, boxes started pouring in to his home. “It just happened,” Jerome said, “People expected us to be involved, so we were. We started passing out things that came to us, but the question persisted: What can we do to help?” One of his contacts from the University of Washington in Seattle called with the same question. Together, they decided to do something that would help and be environmentally friendly. They would connect with local bike clubs in Seattle and collect good working bikes to pass out throughout south Louisiana.

By the time Hurricane Rita hit, the bike clubs had already started collecting, and the idea started to take on a life of its own. The bike clubs set up collection points and bike shops donated time to put them in good working order. Yellow Freight Line volunteered three 18-wheelers to carry the bikes to Louisiana.

While the bikes were being collected, Jerome got busy in Louisiana. He arranged for bike to go to Baton Rouge, New Orleans and Calcasieu Parish. Her personally helped pass out 50 bikes at Booker T. Washington Court. Every child without a bike got one! Some of the bikes went to churches so that they could distribute them. In total, 1,000 bikes given away. Jerome said he enjoyed giving to the community in a way that promoted good health, clean air and quality transportation. The bike clubs of Seattle have already collected the next 1,000 bikes so that they can be ready to help others in the future.

## Southwest Louisiana’s Unsung Heroes

## **Mary Ann Dutton**



The night an evacuation of New Orleans was recommended for Hurricane Katrina, Mary Ann Dutton got a call from the staff at her church to see if she had any spare cots or sleeping bags they could use so that they could open the church building to shelter hurricane evacuees. The church mobilized to help when a church member stopped to help a family whose car had broken down and could find no hotel rooms for them.

Ms. Dutton volunteered to work, while sleeping bags, cots, pillows, mattresses, towels and food began arriving at the church. A television was brought in so that the 40 or so evacuees who found refuge at the church could keep up to date with news from New Orleans. When it became evident that this would be a long-term evacuation, area churches pooled their resources to help house people, collect supplies for distribution, and cook nightly meals.

As church members helped find housing for evacuees, Ms. Dutton's job was to coordinate the collection of furniture, beds, kitchen equipment and linens to help families make a fresh start. Her dining room became a collection area, and soon every family had pots, pans, bowls, flatware, coffeemakers, can openers, linens and even things to hang on the wall.

## **Southwest Louisiana's Unsung Heroes**