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An Open Letter to the People of Mississippi

Until two years ago, I was not very well acquainted with the state of Mississippi, or it's people. That changed when my son moved to Ocean Springs about two years ago. ////Since then, we make two or three trips to Mississippi each year and we have always enjoyed the relaxed hospitality and friendliness of the people of Mississippi. We are from the town of Warrenville, a suburb about 25 miles west of Chicago.

Son's home destroyed

Hurricane Katrina virtually destroyed the entire area and my son's home was totally destroyed along with everything he owned. He managed to get out of the area before the hurricane hit, but he only made it to the house of friends in Pascagoula whose home was also destroyed. Needless to say, we were extremely worried as the news of the devastation became known. The day after the storm we were greatly relieved when he was able to call us thanks to a total stranger who had a cell phone that was working and who generously allowed people to line up and use his phone to contact their families to let them know that they had survived the storm.

Heading South to help

However, like so many others, my son had lost everything he owned except the clothes on his back. When he called, he was standing on the side of a road, homeless, thirsty and hungry and with only his two dogs the he had saved. We were still very worried about his safety. I loaded up my car with as much water, food and supplies as I could carry to give to those in need and headed south, not knowing where I would be able to meet up with my son but, from reports, the Mobile, Alabama area seemed like the best bet. I drove the 1,000 straight through and, fortunately, when I was within 200 miles of Mobile, m wife called me to let me know that my son had contacted her and my guess had been a good one- my son could meet me just west of Mobile.

After finding him, it was night by the time we were ready to leave and head back north but I still had a car load of stuff that I knew would be needed by unfortunate people in devastated areas. My son suggested that we head to Pascagoula and

distribute those things. Having seen and read of looting and violence in some areas of destruction, especially New Orleans, I was a bit apprehensive about going into an area of destruction. I had visions of people fighting over the things that I had to offer but my son and I went despite those reservations. What I found when we arrived a very badly hit area of Pascagoula was a testament to the goodness of people in general, and the people of Mississippi specifically. Misfortune on such a scale brings out the best and worst in people, but I found nothing but the best.

Destruction everywhere

Heading east towards Pascagoula, we passed through rural areas and almost immediately we started to see the destruction. Then we got to Pascagoula which had been hit very hard in the area that we saw. We went into lower middle-class neighborhoods and the devastation was almost unimaginable. Trees down, power lines on the ground everywhere. It was pitch dark. It was difficult to tell where one house ended and another began. The remains of destroyed houses, downed trees, cars, trucks, etc. were all mixed in heaps. A roof from a house laying on top of another house, etc. It reminded one of the destruction of war. There was a new moon and it was totally dark with the exception of our headlights as they passed through the debris. It was surreal.

People emerged from rubble

We drove up and down the streets and it appeared that the area was totally abandoned. I saw no sign of people and it was totally silent. We would stop and shut off the engine in the rubble here and there and the stillness was almost deafening.

Then we would call out softly, “Is anyone there?” and slowly dark forms would emerge from the rubble... little children, white people, black people, old people... all kinds of people. It was like dark ghosts were forming out of the rubble or dead people were rising up out of their graves. It’s hard to explain how eerie it was to someone who has not seen it. The people were obviously hungry and thirsty and their clothes were torn and they smelled. (Sewage exploded out of their toilets when the surge hit.)

Then an amazing thing happened. We asked them if they needed anything, and, in almost every instance, they would quietly say that they had plenty! They would tell us that we should check down the street and point the way to another rubble heap. The people had absolutely nothing and they were too proud and too concerned for other people to accept anything. Only about one in twenty people would accept something but they all thanked us profusely for offering. About the only way I could get them to take anything was if I suggested that maybe their children would like some fresh fruit or granola bars.

Nobody was greedy

We wanted to give them whole bags and boxes of fruit and other foods, but at most they would open a bag and take only one apple, leaving the rest for others. It was heartbreaking. It was actually difficult to give the things to people who clearly needed it desperately. Contrary to what I had seen on TV, I felt that the areas of devastation that I saw might be the safest places in the world for anyone to be. We heard the same thing from everyone we saw... "We have plenty." They had nothing, and they were obviously hungry and their only concern was the welfare of their neighbors. They were even concerned about us! I have no doubt that they would have given us something if they had something to give, and we had asked for it. I will never forget the experience of the character of the people of Mississippi that was revealed to me that night. This is something people were not seeing on TV.

Goodness restores faith

The goodness of the people of Mississippi has renewed my faith in the basic goodness of people in general. I am indebted to you for that gift. But the people of Illinois did not disappoint me either. After arriving back in Illinois, there was an outpouring of support for my son and the people of Mississippi. One car dealership who heard about my son's experience gave him a brand-new pickup truck (his was destroyed in the hurricane) to use as long as he wanted. My son then packed the truck with donated items that good and generous people of Illinois wanted to give to hurricane victims in Mississippi, and my son headed back down to your state to distribute them. He's back there now.

This disaster has revealed the amazing goodness of the people of Mississippi.

Tom Johnston
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