

# FRIENDS IN NEED

## USMS Katrina Relief Grants Boost Weary Southern Swimmers

by Michael J. Stott

**E**arly on, it was easy for those not directly affected by Hurricane Katrina to have a detached perspective. Sure, the TV networks bombarded viewers nationwide with images and pleas for help, but TV always does that. As the days turned to weeks and the magnitude of the storm's wrath mounted, it became clear, however, that those sound bites from the edge had a much more personal connection for everyone...and not just because gas prices went through the roof.

**Mike Stott, a contributing writer for SWIMMER, is a member of Virginia Masters.**

To recap, Hurricane Katrina ranks as the most destructive and costliest natural disaster in U.S. history. On Aug. 29, 2005, Katrina's storm surge breached levees around New Orleans. Flooding ensued for most of the city, as compromised drainage and navigation canals allowed water to flow from Lake Pontchartrain into low-lying areas of the city and St. Bernard Parish. The powerful storm also wreaked havoc on

the coasts of Mississippi and Alabama.

Total damage estimates top \$80 billion (and continue to grow), nearly double the cost of the previous most expensive storm, Hurricane Andrew, which hit South Florida and Louisiana in 1992. Seven months after Katrina's assault, New Orleans housed slightly more than 100,000 people—less than a quarter of the pre-storm population. As of April, the Bush administration had sought \$105 billion for repairs and regional reconstruction. At least 1,836 people lost their lives. Many others lost their lives as they knew them, and their livelihoods as well.

A year later the devastation remains, still widespread and very personal. "It's hard for most people to comprehend, and, circumstantially, things aren't a whole lot different than they were months ago," says Dave Miner, coach of the Elmwood Sharks Masters in New Orleans and member of the USMS Ad Hoc Katrina Task Force. "That's the backdrop you have to have to see how people have adjusted," he says.

The victim testimonials are stunning, numbing and tragically similar. Betty Russo has been a member of Elmwood Sharks since the team's inception 10 years ago. She is 75. Her home and rental property were located a half block from the break of the 17th Street canal levee, and each property received 10 feet of water.

On a micro scale she says, "I lost everything—furniture, appliances large and small, clothes, luggage, mattress, CD, VCR, DVD, TV, tapes, dishes, etc., including Speedo swimsuits, fins, towels, swim hats, goggles and gym bags. It has been a battle to relocate since prices of property and rentals have increased enormously. My house is up for sale and I am staying with a friend. Both of my children are out of state. I lost my main income from my flooded rental property."

On a macro level, her take is both poignant and pungent. "The damage here is unbelievable. You have to feel it and smell it:



**Betty Russo (right) has been a member of Elmwood Sharks since the team's inception 10 years ago. She is 75. Her home and rental property were located a half block from the break of the 17th Street canal levee, and each property received 10 feet of water.**





**Joyce Constance (below), another Elmwood Shark, lost her home and virtually every worldly possession after her house of 50 years in Lacombe, La., (47 miles north of New Orleans) was underwater for 30 days.**

the 3-D effect. Then it really hits you.”

It really hit Joyce Constance, another Elmwood Shark, who lost her home and virtually every worldly possession after her house of 50 years in Lacombe, La., (47 miles north of New Orleans) was underwater for 30 days. Replacement cost of possessions alone is \$150,000 plus. “The emotional toll is great and keeps coming back in waves. I’m in a FEMA trailer on my daughter’s property in Lacombe,” she wrote in March. At least she was alive. Two of her neighbors rode out the hurricane to their deaths.

Long before these letters were written to the USMS Katrina Task Force, Americans were grasping the magnitude of the disaster. While recognition, realization and mobilization by FEMA and the federal government was slow, Masters leadership was proactive in its assessment of the damage and the need for organized relief.

USMS concern coalesced in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., in early September 2005 at the American Swim Coaches of America conference. Casual conversations on the way to workouts morphed into action plans spearheaded by former USMS Vice President Scott Rabalais, now coach at Savannah College of Art and Design but formerly Crawfish Masters coach, and, until five years ago, a life-long resident of Louisiana.

The mechanics of an aid effort progressed as Walnut Creek, Calif., Masters coach Kerry O’Brien recalled that event-based fundraising had a past history of success. At the USMS Convention in mid September last year, the Ad

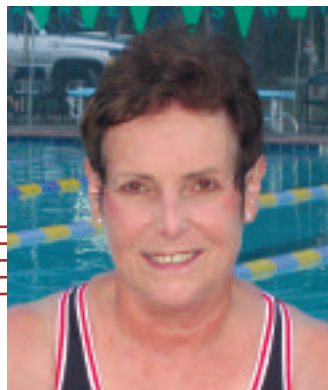


Hoc Katrina Task Force was formed with Rabalais as its chair. Looking to upcoming events, the task force sought and gained approval from host O\*H\*T\*O Masters to add a Katrina fundraising component to the USMS One Hour Postal Championship in January. The USMS House of Delegates ratified the action.

Organizers of the Postal Championships had no feel for the amount of funds they could expect. O\*H\*T\*O Masters contributed \$1 for each One Hour Swim entrant who donated to the cause and gave participants the option of contributing additional monies. These sources produced \$3,059.50. The USMS Endowment Fund offered \$5,000; an additional \$5,000 from the USMS operating budget swelled the fund to \$13,059.50.

Although targeting potential grant recipients was relatively easy, communicating with them was not. E-mail was a start, but phone and mail service disruptions, fractured family units and the pressures of resurrecting lives made the notification process unsatisfactory at best. “Communication with swimmers became a real problem,” says Miner, who is also chair of the Southern LMSC. After the storm, many normal practice

**“We gutted the home immediately, beginning Sept. 1. Under very spartan conditions we returned on Oct. 3 to live in a gutted house with electricity, some plumbing and a few bare necessities.” —Pat Arnold (right)**



groups simply ceased to exist. Although the Elmwood Sharks were up and running within seven weeks, attendance was reduced from 60 regulars to about 10.

As national concerns about funds reaching the needy surfaced, the Task Force was adamant that USMS aid directly benefit swimmers rather than be funneled to a general fund. “That’s why we took it to a more personal level,” says Rabalais. “Even so, I was concerned we didn’t meet people’s needs in a lot of cases.”

In the face of disaster, needs are relative. USMS was not in a position to ante up \$150,000 to replace Constance’s lost possessions or Miner’s two lost dwellings. But it was gifted enough to consider the requests of each of the eight applicants and issue checks to start the rebuilding process.

Pat Arnold of Slidell, La., used part of her grant to participate in this year’s XI FINA World Masters Championships. “The fact that Masters was willing to use [the Postal Championships] as a fundraiser to help the Katrina victims alone just blew me over,” says Arnold, 67, and perennial Top 10 distance swimmer. “Psychologically that just put me over the top. I was overwhelmed. The help people have given us from around the country has just been terrific. The emotional help alone is appreciated.”

If bad things come at good times, Katrina showed up when Arnold was at her fittest. Fresh from USMS Long Course Nationals in Mission Viejo, Calif., she was quickly plunged into

three straight weeks of 14-hour days, scraping inch-thick muck off floors that had been submerged by three feet of water.

“We were homeless for five weeks, residing with relatives. Everything in the house below three feet was ruined,” Arnold wrote. “We gutted the home immediately, beginning Sept. 1. Under very spartan conditions we returned on Oct. 3 to live in a gutted house with electricity, some plumbing and a few bare necessities.”

Here’s the good news: Arnold was one of the lucky ones. Insurance covered all of her repairs and content replacement except about \$1,200.

The bad news is that she had planned to retire this past summer. Those plans are now on hold because her retirement vehicle, a “grossly underinsured” double townhouse rental property in New Orleans, took on 7.5 feet of water. As a result, she was forced to take out an SBA loan to complete the repairs. Short-term, she will be unable to retire with the new loan obligation.

An unsettled life also continues for Constance, 73, who has been swimming competitively since age 55, earning more than 200 medals. She was able to salvage two of them along with some dishes from her destroyed home. Currently she is living with a daughter in an Atlanta suburb and has finally gotten back into an Olympic size pool three days a week at the North Cobb Aquatic Center. She does not intend to return to Lacombe until the conclusion of the 2006 hurricane season. Speaking for many others she observes, “I

think people are being cautious and really want to see what this hurricane season does.”

In an effort to effect more wide-ranging relief, Southern LMSC registrar Baker Kearfott submitted a request for 2006 dues relief for all Southern LMSC members, citing more pressing demand on membership resources, reduced registrations and uncertain long-term LMSC prospects. “This action will cover those members that are truly needy,” he wrote. “It will also enable me to announce the program to persons who have not registered, thus stimulating additional interest and registration. This will assure that the LMSC remains financially sound during this period of rebuilding and lower participation.”

Grants were awarded in early June and Kearfott hopes the availability of funds will stimulate participation. At that time, registrations were off by about 30 percent and meet attendance was down considerably. “We hope this will make a psychological difference and allow people to

remain connected when otherwise they may choose not to be,” says Miner.

In the Task Force’s wisdom, a grant was also extended to a facility that serviced tens of thousands of swimmers annually. The University of New Orleans Aquatic Center at the Lakefront Arena, with its eight-lane, 50-meter pool, has long been a venue for large meets and always offered reduced workout fees for walk-in Masters swimmers. Katrina inflicted severe roof and subsequent water damage to the facility.

“The pool looks as if you could swim in it tomorrow,” says manager Janice Roth, who will use USMS funds to offset scoreboard repairs. Getting the aquatic center up to speed demonstrates the federal government’s Catch-22 response to disaster. Infighting between Homeland Security and FEMA “who don’t speak to each other,” says Roth, only exacerbates the fact that her pool is “way down” on the priority list.

Roth believes that the pool will not open until January 2007. This, despite the fact that her facility also taught water safety skills to more than 300 disadvantaged people from the hardest hit Lakeview, Gentilly and New Orleans East areas—some of whom used their newfound aquatic skills to save themselves during the storm.

While life in the Gulf states goes on, it is clearly not the same. “It’s a very different role that Masters swimming seems to be playing than it did pre-

### **USMS Katrina Relief Task Force Members**

- Rob Copeland, USMS president
- Scott Rabalais, Ad Hoc Katrina Task Force chair
- Doug Church, USMS Endowment Fund Board of Governors chair
- Traci Grilli, USMS national office administrator
- Mark Gill, USMS vice president of member services
- Dave Miner, Southern LMSC chair
- Baker Kearfott, Southern LMSC registrar
- Ed O’Brien, Southern LMSC treasurer

Katrina,” says Miner. For Arnold and many others, swimming remains a form of stress release, but Miner, a long-time coach, is seeing people who have never gained weight adding pounds, and swimmers who’ve always maintained weight losing it.

“I also have people who have never had an interrupted training cycle dealing with the emotional and physical issues of getting back in shape again,” he says. “I tell them to trust the training process itself and do not worry about the clock. They have to block out the memories of how it used to feel.”

By fall, Pat Arnold will have a pleasant memory of Worlds as recovery continues at home. But more Southern LMSC members will still be grinding hard to recapture some semblance of a pre-Katrina lifestyle. Masters swimming is aiding that process. “It has helped people to reconnect and to instill a sense of order and control in their personal lives when everything seems overwhelmingly out of control,” says Miner.

For many, swimming has been a reaffirmation of the human spirit, both their own and those around them. <<<

AD

AD