

AVSI-USA SPECIAL REPORT

June 2006

AVSI-USA IS PART OF THE AVSI INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

AVSI-USA Mission: To support the AVSI network by leveraging resources and contacts in the U.S. in order to enhance and broaden the achievements of member organizations in promoting human dignity in developing countries.

BEAUTY IN THE WAKE OF KATRINA

The following is a report of the Adopt-a-Family Campaign supported by AVSI-USA and organized to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the story of its birth, those who were helped by it, and those who gave generously to make it happen. We hope it may move you as much as it moved us and that it may leave you in awe of the many little miracles God has worked through all those who partook in this experience.



Hurricane Katrina Hits the Gulf Coast

August 25, 2005

(National Environmental Satellite)

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In the words of Mukonyezi Joshua John, a student at the Kitante Hill School in Kampala, Uganda, *“As people of God, we feel that we are all members of only one family—like brothers & sisters because of the same colour of blood we share.”* In the midst of tragedies like Hurricane Katrina, there emerges a cry in the human heart, a cry for help, a cry of *why?* When we are confronted with our helplessness in the face of the power of nature, when we realize our limited ability to find a meaning in human suffering, we recognize that the same human blood pulses in all our veins, the same questions beat in all our hearts. This awareness is the root of solidarity and the springboard for charity, for it fills us with a need for companionship in finding an answer to this universal cry and ignites a love for fellow man.

HOW IT BEGAN

The great sorrow at the devastation left behind by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 led Pope Benedict XVI to send the President of the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*, Archbishop Josef Cordes, to New Orleans to be *“the witness of my solidarity.”* During a press conference on September 12th in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, he encouraged people not to be ensnared in polemics and attempts to pinpoint blame. Rather, he urged focusing attention on the true needs of the victims of the hurricane. He said, *“As faithful believers, we are convinced that the important events of history have significance on our journey toward eternal happiness—which certainly we often discover only with difficulty. Thus, we experience that human aid, while important, is not enough. In an emergency such as this, we feel powerless and seek the Someone who helps us beyond earthly life.”*

Present also at the press conference was Ezio Castelli, President of AVSI-USA (Association of Volunteers in International Service), who accompanied Archbishop Cordes on visits with evacuees in Baton Rouge. Reflecting on the experience, Castelli said, *“To watch Archbishop Cordes with the people was a lesson in charity. [...] The food packages, the most sophisticated organization for distribution and for rescue is certainly needed; but only being looked at and embraced in one’s destiny truly makes a difference.”*

With this desire to provide financial aid



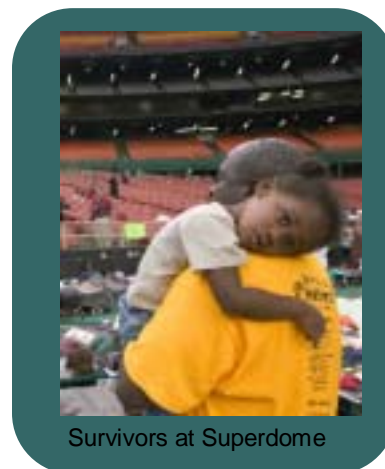
Arch. Cordes, with Marine escort

while embracing the complete human drama of the hurricane victims, AVSI-USA felt the need to organize some effort to help Katrina survivors. Recognizing the immensity of the task at hand, AVSI-USA published a flyer, entitled **“Out of Sorrow, Hope,”** announcing a fundraising campaign and stating, *“Their needs can be summarized in one word: everything. A friendly companionship with the victims, sharing their needs and sorrow to discover the meaning of suffering and the precariousness of human life, is the path to reawaken hope that can make a difference in their lives.”*

AVSI-USA found a way to establish close relationships with those it aided by joining with the **Adopt-a-Family Campaign** initiated by Chris Vath, a music director in New York City and native to New Orleans. After the hurricane, Vath called relatives and friends in the New Orleans area, asking them to refer

families they knew needed help. He collected the names of these families and their stories of hurricane-related trauma and brought them to the attention of AVSI-USA, which decided to support his effort and launch a fundraising campaign. Vath’s family members remarked that it was not difficult to locate worthy families, as severe need was everywhere.

Initially, the requests for aid were from families who were hosting displaced families in Louisiana and in Houston, Texas. Many of these host families were members of Communion and Liberation (CL), the Catholic movement from which AVSI-USA sprang and of which Chris Vath is a member. Later, other families were connected with the Adopt-a-Family Program through friends who work in hospitals and schools in the Gulf Coast region.



Survivors at Superdome

WHO WAS HELPED

Hurricane Katrina's path of devastation left behind three particularly difficult situations: the loss of home and property, the scattering and disruption of families, and the unemployment of about 500,000 people. In a situation where every request for aid was more tragic and desperate than the previous, AVSI-USA adopted certain criteria to determine how to distribute its funds. AVSI-USA decided upon priority criteria of unemployment, the number of children in a family's care, health conditions, and the presence of elderly or disabled persons. Secondary criteria were damage to the family's home and the extent of their mortgage burden.

As of June 2006, 49 families have been helped through the Adopt-a-Family program. Most had to leave their homes due to flooding, and were living in overcrowded apartments or in FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailers, for those who qualified for FEMA aid. Few were able to salvage the furniture, clothes, and belongings soaked in inches and even feet of water. In most cases one, if not both, working adults had lost their jobs. After extended closures, children were thrust into new schools or forced to miss

semesters of college. Many have been sick and in need of money to continue medications and therapies. Others faced depression or worse, separation or divorce. Some families had to assume new responsibilities for parents or elderly relatives in addition to other, unexpected, economic strains.

Here are some of their particular stories. A family of three was split up between two different cities; two members were relocated to Louisiana, and the third to Mississippi. They were still paying mortgage on their flooded house. Another family was living with a friend; both parents had lost their jobs, the sons were developing depression, and they were caring for their nephews. Furthermore, one family member was still undergoing radiation therapy while recovering from Grey's disease. An elderly couple, both legally blind, lost their home to flooding when the husband was only five months away from retirement. Another man was evacuated from a hospital where he was being treated for lung cancer. He decided not to resume treatment until his family could afford a home. His family, consisting of eight adults and

one child, was originally living in a hotel.

Yet even within these disastrous circumstances, it was amazing to discover people who had hope for the future and performed acts of true charity. One man described his situation by writing: *"My fiancée is five months pregnant. She needs to see a doctor on a regular basis and takes pre-natal vitamins. Her son is starting kindergarten this year. We are both unemployed at the present time. Things are hard but we believe things will work out and our lives will be complete again."* Such hopeful words coming from such an uncertain situation reveal an incredible amount of faith, just as the following example displays an unbelievable capacity for love. One woman used to clean the house for a handicapped lady and also cared for an elderly gentleman in the hospital; when she lost her home to the hurricane, the man's son took her in out of gratitude.

AVSI-USA has sent out checks ranging from \$500-\$2000, from a total of \$60,000 collected for the victims of Hurricane Katrina.



Home of the Hoffmans: Before and After Hurricane Katrina

AVSI-USA purposefully did not insist that families use the money for any particular expense, but entrusted the gift wholly to the freedom of the family. Through communication with these families we have learned that they have used it to rent apartments, provide some beauty at Christmas, prepare for the birth of their children, purchase new clothes and beds and meet the unexpected expenses of high bills and repair costs. Others are saving part of the money as down payment on homes. Good things have happened since the hurricanes: two baby girls were born, the son of one family got a full scholarship to a private university, and many others realized the immense value of family and friends.

Profile of Beneficiaries

No. of Families	48
No. of Adults living in Families Supported	125
No. of Children living with Supported Families	34
Lost Home Completely	29
Temporarily or Permanently Unemployed	20
Significant Health Expenses	13
Mortgage Burden on Destroyed Home	7

AROUND THE WORLD

Immediately after the hurricane, a statement published by the International Catholic movement, Communion & Liberation entitled, "The Infinite Present in America's Suffering," was circulated within the US and world wide. This statement acknowledged the great sorrow caused by the tragedy, but also the great hope made possible because of "the announcement of Someone who [...] does not try to explain evil or find the guilty, but prays and invokes the Father to defeat this evil and give hope anew." The desire to announce this "Christian hope and love for every man" provoked many

individuals, communities and groups to support AVSI and the Adopt-a-Family Campaign.

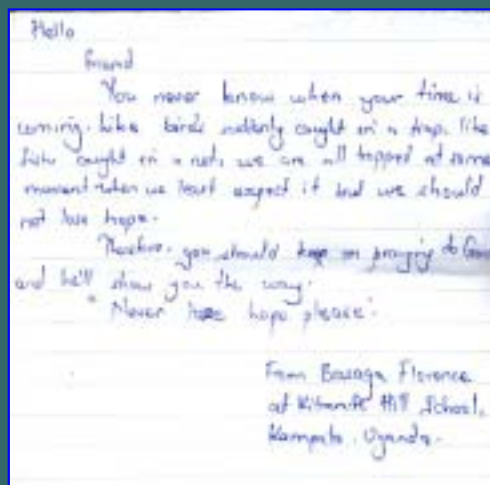
In various cities of the United States, people felt the strong urge to help those in the Gulf Coast region, despite not being present to open up their homes and physically embrace the victims with all of their needs. Instead, high school groups in Washington, D.C. and Brooklyn, New York organized successful bake sales. In Manhattan, New York, a group of friends organized a concert with local bands to raise money for

the Katrina victims. AVSI-Italy also contributed to the relief effort by including the Adopt-a-Family program as one of the five projects it supported with its annual fundraising campaign and also received donations from hundreds of people throughout Italy.

These responses to human suffering exemplify a solidarity which unites all people, and which puts into focus and magnifies our nature to give selflessly in times of hardship. Paradoxically, in times of great suffering, our love intensifies.



Living Room in Hoffman's Home



Letter from student in Kampala

UGANDANS GIVE FROM THE HEART

AVSI-Uganda also communicated the Adopt-a-Family initiative to its local partners and friends throughout the country. Even months after the hurricanes had ravaged the Gulf Coast of the US, hundreds of women, men and children throughout Uganda found themselves moved to make a sacrifice for those who had suffered in the path of Hurricane Katrina.

The outreach effort which has touched many hearts in perhaps the most profound way is the story of 200 women from Uganda who felt the effects of the hurricane resonate across an entire ocean. The great suffering of so many struck these Ugandan women in a concrete and personal way. Living in a country ravaged by war for over 19 years, managing to survive despite many cases of HIV and AIDS, and working in strip quarries to break up rocks for building material, these women from the Kireka slum of Kampala, Uganda, understand the suffering of the Americans who had suddenly been displaced and robbed of all possessions. The women, members of a community based organization, **Meeting Point International**, earn wages of around \$1.20 per day, but this did not deter or restrain their need to express their message of compassion in a very concrete way: several dozen women proudly combined their earnings to raise nearly \$900 to send to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Amy Cunningham, from the US Embassy in Uganda, and several other officials attended the presentation of these funds to AVSI in October of last year.

Meeting Point International is an organization based in Uganda whose goal is "to be present among the people

of Kireka and support them," according to **Rose Busingye**, the Ugandan nurse who runs the organization. She shared the sentiment of the women of Kireka towards the victims of Hurricane Katrina: *"Those people who are suffering, they belong to us. They are our people. Their problems are our problems. Their children are like our children."* Meeting Point International was responsible for organizing the two-week period during which the women raised their meager wages. Akullu Margaret, one of the Ugandan women who donated her wages, sent a letter along with her donation saying, *"So I give to you the love that has been shown to me. My gift is a sign of that love which was given to me the first time by people who did not know me. So the greatest thing in this world, even greater than any suffering or illness, is the love we have for one another."* AVSI has been working together with Meeting Point International to provide accompaniment and care for the sick and suffering in the slums of Kampala, and presently is managing funds provided by USAID for a program to care for orphans and children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS which is underway in Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda.

In the war-torn northern region of Uganda, **Archbishop John Baptist Odama** of the Archdiocese of Gulu organized special collections for the hurricane relief effort in the Catholic churches of his archdiocese. Over several weeks, Odama raised \$500.



US Embassy Representative breaks rocks with women from Meeting Point

In various schools in Uganda, the students were powerfully touched after reading the judgment on the hurricane entitled "The Infinite Present in America's Suffering." They wished to reassure victims of the real possibility of maintaining hope and finding the meaning of their suffering. Basagna Florence, a student at Kitante Hill School, wrote, *"...we are all trapped at some moment when we least expect it but we should not lose hope."*

The human provocation in front of another's pain is true even for the poorest among us, as the women and children in Uganda have taught us. Although according to some standards, they did not have tremendous sums of money to offer, the Ugandans' outpouring of selfless generosity, their message of undying hope, and their capacity for human love abounds a hundredfold. It is not the amount that takes us aback, but rather the human impulse to give to their fellow human beings in a time of crisis.

NEW ORLEANS RETURNS THE FAVOR

The story of the generosity of Rose and the women at Meeting Point International in Kampala, Uganda, inspired a newspaper article entitled "A Wealth of Compassion" published on Thanksgiving morning in the top New Orleans daily paper. Within hours of circulation, AVSI-USA began receiving an outpouring of thanks from the people of New Orleans whose hearts were deeply moved. Out of their gratitude for the lesson of the women of Meeting Point, they themselves have voluntarily donated around \$5,000 for the women of Meeting Point. The funds have been channeled into a revolving fund housed at Meeting Point International which provides the women with small loans for their income generating activities and small businesses. More importantly perhaps, the revolving fund operates with groups of five women who accompany each other so as to not be alone in front of sickness and death, but who together affirm the meaning of everything including work. The loans encourage self-reliance even among patients, and teach that life is valuable and people are ultimately responsible for themselves and their families.

Monthly committee meetings enable the members to make decisions on loan amounts, repayments and the occasional grace period for a sick member. The 85% repayment rate is adequate according to the managers given the frequency with which sickness and death preclude steady revenue generation.

The donations received from the women in Kampala, Uganda particularly touched the hurricane victims not because of the magnitude of the donations, but because they came from people who have very little themselves. AVSI-USA has been

very aware of their incapacity to fix the many problems presented by the hurricane, but through this gesture of generosity AVSI-USA hopes to have made possible solidarity among people who don't even know each other, but share a common destiny.

Ms. Lee C. Schnell of New Orleans thanked a Ugandan woman, "... You have so little yet you gave so much of yourself. You have the biggest heart and the most love...I will pray for you. Please continue to pray for us...Thank you again for caring so much. It gives us courage." She went on to say, "The lily is a flower that grows easily in our area.

HAPPY THANKSGIVING

The Times-Picayune

50 CENTS 100th year No. 307 THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2005 METRO EDITION

Impoverished women from war-torn Uganda perform arduous labor for weeks to raise money for local hurricane victims



A WEALTH OF COMPASSION

By Bruce Nolan
Staff Writer

The Kireka slum clings to a steep hillside above Kampala, Uganda, home to at least 5,000 impoverished refugees who live in hand-fashioned shelters bordered by outdoor latrines. The hillside is not only home, but work: Strip quarry lies its face. Men dig out its larger rocks, while hundreds of women spend their days in stooped manual labor, pounding the rocks by hand into walnut-sized stones for sale as construction material. They earn about \$1.20 per day.

So American aid worker Amy Cunningham could scarcely believe it when she was summoned to Kireka last month for a festive celebration in which dozens of women handed over nearly \$600 in wages: their gift to victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

"I was just completely blown away," Cunningham said. "At first I thought, 'This can't be true. These people are just scraping by.' But I went to the ceremony, and they were so happy to be able to send over this money."

See **UGANDA**, A-26

Women of the Kireka slum in Uganda, a country where the average annual income is about \$300, donated nearly \$900 in wages to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The women belong to a group called the Meeting Point whose motto is "One Heart," which means "the heart of man has no race."

Your love and caring remind me of a beautiful flower.” Like a flower which exists as a beautiful sign of something bigger that gave it life, and which grows easily even in an area ravaged by a hurricane, the Ugandan women are a sign in humanity of Someone greater who moved them to generosity.

Alexandra Colmenares-Boza said, “I have to say that what these women have done is beyond anything I have heard in all my 43 years. I am humble at their joy and love and generosity, since reading this article I have nothing to complain about, yes I lost all but I truly am blessed beyond all things...My goal is to be able to give the gift of our hearts to their hearts, for I see the beauty of their hearts, I feel their joy, I am humble before their compassion and generosity.” Ironically, despite having lost everything, she expresses her sensation of actually having everything because she has been shown what love truly means.

John Massarini said, “I was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. Whenever someone gave you food to take home, you returned the plate with something on it to say thank you. We were taught never to bring an empty plate back to that person.” Many others from New Orleans share the same sentiment, and have sent “thank-you” notes that included donations for the Ugandans who raised money for them.

The exchange between Uganda and New Orleans continues. In early June, the members of Meeting Point International sent a large number of gifts, letters and pictures to their new friends in the US, and we are certain that the friendship will continue to grow. The story continues to reverberate in the hearts of many, and has been taken into a number of schools as a living example of generosity and the human spirit.

THANK YOU!

The massive outpouring of kindness and generosity toward the people of the Gulf Coast was received with immense gratitude and appreciation. The magnitude of this appreciation cannot be measured, as was expressed in the astounding number of “thank-you” notes received by AVSI-USA.

The efforts of AVSI-USA and collaborators worldwide have brought financial support and an extension of human compassion, but more than anything, a true perception of hope. One woman said, “Thank you for showing us that in the midst of destruction there is hope and goodness in this world.” Another couple expressed their hope in a new beginning, saying, “In the midst of this confusion, we *do* find hope that in time, a ‘new’ normalcy will be achieved.” Others felt the impulse to give of themselves in response because of the love they were shown, saying, “One day

we’ll be able to return the generosity given to us to another family in need. Thanks again for your beacon of hope.”

One woman recognized AVSI’s purpose, as she said, “To come to the aid of your fellow man in time of crisis is to follow the teachings of Christ. Thank you for helping not only me but the thousands of others your agencies reach out to everyday.”

Another mother who received some assistance observed God’s profound mercy shown to her through human kindness, sharing, “Thank you soooo much for your gift. God’s mercy through your group really touched our hearts! I fell on my knees and cried. God is so good. I’m thankful that He puts kindness and goodness in people’s hearts. May God bless you and your congregation abundantly!”

After the follow-up round of support to the adopted families, AVSI-USA received a number of thank-you letters. One mentioned, “You and your association have again humbled me with your kind words and generous gift- thank you. Our great city is- and will- slowly gain back her former glory. We have still a long way to go, but optimism is high. With the care and concern of your organization and others, the road back to normalcy will be easier to travel.”

In conclusion, we at AVSI-USA would like to express our gratitude to all of the individuals, families and groups who took the provocation to heart and contributed to the Adopt-a-Family program, both through AVSI-USA and directly on their own. Although we began as mere facilitators, in the end we found ourselves as protagonists of a beautiful cycle that was given life by something much greater than us.

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Some of the Faces and Places of the Adopt-a-Family Campaign

AVSI is an international not-for-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in Italy in 1972. **AVSI's** mission is to support human development in developing countries with special attention to education and the promotion of the dignity of every human person, according to Catholic social teaching.

AVSI-USA opened its doors in 2001, first in New York City and subsequently in Washington, D.C., in response to the need for a presence in the U.S. **AVSI-USA** is an autonomous entity registered in the State of New York with 501(c) 3 status. As such, **AVSI-USA** shares the mission and method of the **AVSI** network and provides support to members and initiatives by leveraging resources for existing and new projects, sharing lessons and experiences of the **AVSI** network and method among development practitioners, supporting collaborations with U.S. organizations and donors, and representing **AVSI** at the United Nations and with other international organizations.

AVSI carries out its mission through the planning and implementation of medium and long-term sustainable projects and emergency relief operations in partnership with local associations, institutions, governments, and international agencies. Presently, **AVSI** links together 24 NGO's, most of which are local institutions in non-western countries, into a global Network.

The **AVSI** network is a platform which allows for permanent relationships of support and mutual exchange among member organizations. This support takes the form of dialogue on policy and programming; joint collaboration for planning and implementing targeted initiatives; technical assistance; access to financial resources; regional or global meetings and trainings; site visits and exchanges; and opportunities for linkages with local, regional and international actors in government, business and civil society.

At present, **AVSI** is operating in 35 countries of Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and the Middle East with 86 long-term projects directly benefiting at least 90,000 people in various sectors. Some 120 highly qualified **AVSI** personnel are directly involved in long-term field assignments together with hundreds of locally hired people and supported by dozens of academics and senior practitioners.