Table of Contents

Urban Ministries Relief on Mississippi Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina.............1
9/11 ..................................................................................................................................1
Relief efforts in Africa, Philippines ..............................................................................1, 10
Serving hot meals after Katrina ..................................................................................2
FEMA ...........................................................................................................................2, 7
Donated materials and supplies ..................................................................................2
Keesler Air Force Base ...............................................................................................2, 8
D’Iberville kitchen .......................................................................................................3
Transition from serving meals to reconstructing homes .............................................3
Mold problems after Katrina .....................................................................................3
Recruiting volunteers, WJQ-99 ..................................................................................4
AmeriCorps .................................................................................................................5
Volunteer housing .......................................................................................................5
Volunteers’ stages of adapting to post-Katrina life ....................................................5
Habitat for Humanity ..................................................................................................6
Rebuilding homes versus reconstructing damaged homes .........................................6
Scope of UMR work on Mississippi Gulf Coast .....................................................6, 8
Endurance of UMR work on Mississippi Gulf Coast ...............................................7
Choosing survivors’ homes to reconstruct ...............................................................7
MEMA ........................................................................................................................7
Caseworkers ..............................................................................................................8
San Diego wildfires ....................................................................................................8
Safety precautions for volunteers ...........................................................................8
Scope of Katrina’s destruction ..................................................................................9
More money needed for recovery, circa 2007 .......................................................9
New Orleans Mardi Gras slowed donations ...........................................................9
First volunteer experience ......................................................................................10
Jones: [Today is June] 22, 2007, and we are at 453 Howard Avenue in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Swaykos: OK. And where are we? What do y’all do?

Jones: At ULM [Urban Life Ministries] Relief.

Swaykos: There you go. (laughter) OK. So how did you end up down here at ULM Relief?

Jones: About the third day after Katrina hit, we gathered up a team from up in New York. During 9/11, so many people from the South had come up to help us up in New York that we couldn’t sit by when this disaster hit here without coming in to help. So we got down—

Swaykos: What were you doing in New York?

Jones: I was, at the time, running an Internet-based business, Web hosting, graphics design, that type of thing. And then the group that came down with us, they were all similarly employed with (inaudible) occupations and different businesses.

Swaykos: How many people did y’all bring down?

Jones: The first group is about sixty, I think.

Swaykos: Wow. OK.

Jones: So they got down here. I wasn’t with the first sixty that came down here. I had come down for one-week visits about a month after the storm. But when they first got down here, they saw the need for food, water, and ice, and clothing distribution.

Swaykos: Well, what did they come down with?
Jones: Their own vehicles. They just packed everything up they could. Now, disaster relief isn’t actually brand-new to us. We have a big work over in Africa where we’ve been since 1994. We have 185 people on staff there, and we work orphanages and hospitals. And we even have our own strip over there, so.

Swaykos: Right, right. Yeah.

Jones: And we also have a similar work in the Philippines. So we’ve been doing this kind of thing before, and then after 9/11 we kind of cut our teeth on American disaster.

Swaykos: And what does ULM stand for?

Jones: Urban Life [Ministries]. So then when we got down here, we just set up a camp and started serving meals. The hot meals that we were serving, we were pretty efficient with because we’d done this before. So FEMA came to us and asked us to take over some of their sites because they weren’t able to serve the food as quickly and as efficiently as we were. So we certainly said yes, we’d do that, and we had more than enough people at that point coming down to us after we had gotten established here. So we ended up with a total of seven different sites all around the Gulf. At that point we had seven fully-working kitchens, and we were distributing about 950 tractor-trailer loads full of supplies, which was about thirty-four-million-dollars worth.

Swaykos: Where were you getting all the funding?

Jones: Well, the materials and the supplies were coming in from all over the place. We have our own network for volunteers and donors that we appeal to, but they were really coming out of the woodwork to help because Katrina, as you know, is the worst disaster to ever hit the United States.

Swaykos: Did FEMA give you any funding if they asked you to take over their—

Jones: No. They didn’t give us any money. In fact, we haven’t had one dollar given to us from any government agency, except for Keesler Air Force Base. Keesler Air Force Base Chaplains, which is technically government, had taken up a donation for us and had given us a donation.

Swaykos: OK. So how could FEMA ask you take over their work and not offer you any funding?

Jones: Well, because we said that we would. They said that they were struggling, and we said, “Well, we can do it for you, so we’ll go in and do it.” We did make some good relationships with FEMA as a result of doing that. And I’m sure the next time there’s a disaster, and we’re there, FEMA will look to us to be able to help them get things rolling, as well. The goal really wasn’t to find out how much FEMA could help us financially. It was to help the people that didn’t have anything to eat, so.
Swaykos: Wasn’t it a little—how did you get your funding then to open seven kitchens worth?

Jones: Well, it was, a lot of it was all private donations.

Swaykos: Really? OK.

Jones: Yeah, it was. Now, a lot of manufacturers were sending tractor-trailers full of stuff down. The perishable food was a little bit harder to get, and of course, if it was sent down from somewhere, a lot of times we would have to pay some shipping fees for it. But they would donate the contents of the truck.

Swaykos: I see.

Jones: So that worked pretty well, but that’s pretty much—the money came in from a network of churches and civic organizations. It wasn’t—

Swaykos: How many do you think y’all were serving a day right after the storm?

Jones: Well, just one of the sites in D’Iberville, right over the bridge, we were serving 5,000 for breakfast and 5,000 for dinner; and that’s just one of the sites. I know that the first six months of the storm we had served over 250,000 meals.

Swaykos: Oh my gosh.

Jones: So there was a lot.

Swaykos: OK. And y’all have moved into other services now. Is that correct?

Jones: Yeah. After the initial emergency relief stage of the disaster was pretty much underway, and the trailers were rolling in for people to move into, and a few stores got opened back up, and power came back on, and those types of things, we started looking at the reconstruction phase, which had to be the next step. So we started, in order to become as efficient as we could with the money that we had, we started consolidating all the sites down to one large one, which is where we’re at right now, and gear up toward reconstructing the homes.

Swaykos: Was reconstruction something that your group had ever done before, or do you usually just do distributions, really?

Jones: No. We’ve built buildings and some things along those lines over in Africa. There was housing for some 600 people that we built over there, so that wasn’t actually foreign to us. What was different for us here was the type of damage that the house was and the mold. Mold was a huge factor to have here, and we had to get training and equipment and materials to treat that mold effectively.
Swaykos: Right. Who, at that point, did you have coming down to (inaudible) here for you?

Jones: We were averaging probably about 100 different people a week.

Swaykos: Really.

Jones: Coming in, and they were coming in from all over.

Swaykos: OK. And how could you train people to be building and cleaning and all that when they had no experience in that?

Jones: Well, that’s just the thing. We took a little different task than a lot of the other organizations down here; building reconstruction did. We wanted to focus on contractors and builders and tradespeople that had construction experience, so we contacted various large companies and made a plea to them to send some of their skilled employees down. When the church groups contacted us, we told them that we needed to have at least a four-out-of-ten ratio of skilled contractors. And by doing that, while it reduced our overall numbers, we were running a higher percentage of skilled tradespeople out of this camp than anybody else in the peninsula.

Swaykos: Really?

Jones: And we were able to accomplish a lot with those people.

Swaykos: OK. What types of volunteers, like, do you have now, further down the road?

Jones: We’re pretty much running the same approaches we have been, kind of geared toward the experienced contractors and that kind of thing. We have made some exceptions, and one in particular’s for Michigan. There’s a radio station, WJQ-99, that had come down here three different times, and each time they came down here they were doing live broadcasts right on the site, letting people back home know what was going on. As a result, we had a huge response and continued to have a huge response from Michigan from their listening area. In fact, seventy people here right now are from that listening area. JQ-99 is coming back this Saturday with another thirty people.

Swaykos: Wow.

Jones: So if they’re from the JQ-99 listening area, we will make exceptions and take some newsgroups and some things like that, but we do that very sparingly. And we plan ahead for when they’re going to come here so that they can do things like painting, and yard care, and that kind of thing.
Swaykos: OK. And you have AmeriCorps with you for a while?

Jones: We do. In the beginning, right after the storm, AmeriCorps, which is a government entity—it’s NCCC [National Civilian Community Corps]—they had very few places for their groups to stay. So we had some of the bigger camps around, and we house five or six teams at a time for them, but they weren’t assigned to us.

Swaykos: I see.

Jones: After we got out of that stage and they got their own facilities, they started assigning us teams, and we generally have a team in here most of the time. Looks like just now we’re going to come up on a pretty barren time period, but the last nine months we’ve had a pretty steady team.

Swaykos: Can you explain how you’re housing your volunteers?

Jones: Yes. We have three bunk houses that are air-conditioned and sleep sixty-eight people. Then we have ten tents, which are Army tents with fans, electric, and all those types of things to try to make them a little bit more comfortable. They actually have bunk beds and wooden floors, and calling them tents is kind of a little bit of an understatement as to what they really are. They just don’t have air-conditioning, but we can sleep ninety-six people in those. And then we have a couple of smaller RVs [recreational vehicles] where we can sleep another sixteen people. So overall, we can sleep about 180 people here.

Swaykos: OK. Have you had any problems with any of your volunteers?

Jones: Problems like how?

Swaykos: Some people coming down who maybe didn’t really come down to work or that kind of thing.

Jones: Not really. I think we did have some folks come down—and everyone that comes down—I should say this. Everyone that comes down goes through the seventy-hour phenomenon, and that is the first day they’re here, they’re going to change the entire peninsula. The second day they’re here, everything we’ve been doing up to date is wrong. They’ve got a better way to do it. The third day they’re here, the reality of the gargantuan task it is to rebuild the Coast hits them, and they settle in, and they get on a roll, and they really get some work done, and they feel good at the end of the time they’re here. So apart from that, we haven’t really had too many people come down that have had real problems. There’s been some folks that come down and get bit by fire ants and some of the Southern wonders that happen down here, but for the most part, everybody knows what to expect. We try to brief them pretty thoroughly before they get here.

Swaykos: OK. And they usually stay about a week?
Jones: A week to three is the general timeframe that they set.

Swaykos: And can you tell me about the houses you guys are working on? How many have you done? What sort of work are you doing on them?

Jones: We’ve done about 1100 homes that didn’t require major construction. That included cleaning them out, what they call mucking them out, and then replacing some floor coverings, and cleaning up their yards, and getting the folks moved back in that way. So we had about 1100 of those. Of the ones that are majorly damaged where you had to gut the inside of the house and start all over, I think we’re up to about 150 of those. So it’s about 1250 homes that we’ve done since Katrina hit, but the major construction slows down a whole lot compared to what the early homes were.

Swaykos: Are you having any that are just demolished slabs starting from the very bottom and working up?

Jones: No. And the reason we haven’t done that is financial. It takes about [$45,000] to [$60,000] to build a house from the ground up, and we can rebuild a house for about [$15,000] to $20,000.

Swaykos: I see.

Jones: So we’re doing three to one if we stay with the reconstruction efforts rather than the new builds.

Swaykos: OK. Do you know if there’s anywhere for the new builds that haven’t found anyone who does them?

Jones: There’s very few. Habitat [for Humanity] was here doing a couple of them, but that’s their program. That’s what they do. They do new houses all across the country, and that’s what they do. Other than those, unless the homeowners had some funds, or there were some other assistance that they were getting, there’s very few rebuilds going on. I know of maybe a dozen in the peninsula, and that’s it.

Swaykos: OK. Where all are you working on the Coast?

Jones: Well, we started from just outside of Gulfport, all the way down to Biloxi, and as the construction started getting more intense and more severe with the damage, we started consolidating down to the peninsula, which is East Biloxi. And that’s mostly from [Interstate] 110 towards Ocean Springs to the Point.

Swaykos: OK. Are you planning on going back over once you get some work done in this area? Are you going to move (inaudible)?

Jones: We’ll stay here and rebuild homes as long as we can find funding to do it.
Swaykos: OK. Say there was enough of effort to be around ten years. Then y’all are willing to do that, stay down here that long?

Jones: I would say ten years is an understatement.

Swaykos: Really?

Jones: But we’ll stay here as long as we can keep raising money to build houses.

Swaykos: Wonderful. How are you picking who to build for?

Jones: We started with that process when we were feeding people. We would have them fill out an application as we were serving them a hot meal, and finding out whether they were homeowners, and assessing the damage to their homes. Then it goes in to our caseworkers where we determine whether they’ve been paid insurance settlements or large FEMA grants or things along those lines. And then after we filter the ones that had insurance checks out of the picture, then we target the ones that have gotten minimal FEMA money and who have no chance of rebuilding their house unless someone comes in to help them.

Swaykos: I see. Do you think there’s anyone in this whole caseworker (inaudible) that everybody has, like falling through the cracks? Those people who got a little bit of insurance money but definitely not enough?

Jones: No. I don’t think so because what we look at is there was several groups [giving out] grants. There’s FEMA. There’s MEMA. There’s insurance. There’s various agencies out there that were going to the homeowners and trying to help them. So when we assessed a home, it was the bottom-line dollar amount that they got from all of the assistance that they were able to get. It wasn’t that they got an insurance check and couldn’t build their house.

Swaykos: Right.

Jones: There’s cases where we’ve completed a house that I can think of now where she got a $3,000 insurance check. That’s not going to help her too much.

Swaykos: Right.

Jones: I will say, also, that not all of the organizations do comprehensive casework, and I’ve seen organizations come in and rebuild houses for people that we’ve rejected based on the amount of money that they received.

Swaykos: I see.
**Jones:** So I’m not saying that they don’t need to move into their house, but casework is really important.

**Swaykos:** OK. How are you training your caseworkers? Where are they coming from?

**Jones:** The caseworkers that we started with kind of cut their teeth up at 9/11 when they were doing casework for a lot of the folks up there. And then when they got down here, they had kind of systems and ideas in mind of what to get started with. We did have some folks that were with us that were experienced with the San Diego wildfires, so the house damage and people becoming homeless wasn’t new to them either. So we had a good format to start off of, and then once you get the system in place, it makes it a lot easier to train people how to do the system.

**Swaykos:** Right. How do you keep track and make sure that people aren’t getting help from you and then maybe going somewhere else and getting help, that kind of thing?

**Jones:** Because our help is total. When we move someone into their house, they’re finished. They won’t need anything else. A lot of the—well, I shouldn’t say a lot, but some of the other organizations were going in, and they were trying to just get people moved in. So they would give them one kitchen cabinet with a sink, and then one toilet and one shower, no floor coverings, those kinds of things because they’re expensive. And they were trying to move people in, and all of it works for good, but you still are going to have people that have no money that now are going to be living with one cabinet in their house, and that makes things difficult.

**Swaykos:** Definitely. How are you insuring the safety of both your volunteers who are building with a little experience and also then the homeowners who are moving into these homes?

**Jones:** Well, the volunteers, again, there’s (inaudible) experience, so usually, always, in fact, there is always at least two people on each project that have experience. We never send someone out that doesn’t know what they’re doing and send them on a project that they don’t know how to do without someone experienced being there. Safety is very critical for us. Keesler Air Force Base comes here a lot, and their safety standards are pretty much the ones that we follow for all of our volunteers. We have almost as much safety equipment as we have tools. We haven’t had any serious injuries or accidents on any of the projects, a couple of banged fingers, couple of cuts, those kinds of things, but nothing serious.

**Swaykos:** As the days are getting hotter, are your work days cutting down, or are you just providing more water, and stuff like that?

**Jones:** We usually send two coolers full of Powerade, Gatorade, and water to each project that’s ongoing, and then we have a group back there that makes sure that
there’s plenty of frozen ice, and drinks are going out cold, and that kind of thing. The work days pretty much stay the same. We do have some big construction fans that we set up in the houses to try to get ventilation going through the houses to keep folks cool. If it’s roof work or attic insulation, those kinds of things happen bright and early in the morning before the sun gets hot, so we try to take as much care as we can during the summer to do that.

**Swaykos:** I see. How is the monstrosity of this devastation affecting the people who come who maybe have only seen it on TV or seen only New Orleans on TV and not seeing a part of the Coast?

**Jones:** Well, they’re overwhelmed when they get here because they realize it’s almost two years after Katrina and the damage is—they drove down here on Highway 90—is just as—half the buildings are still gone.

**Swaykos:** Right, right.

**Jones:** So it’s overwhelming to them.

**Swaykos:** Yeah. What changes, and (inaudible), but what changes need to be made, do you think, before we could clear this process up?

**Jones:** That’s a very good question. You know what? As sad as it sounds, it always comes down to the money.

**Swaykos:** Yeah.

**Jones:** You can do more work with more money. And I don’t think there’s a shortage of people that are willing to come down here and work, but I think there is a shortage of ways to get material and ways to pay for electric bills and gas in vehicles, and those kind of things. I think there’s a huge shortage for that.

**Swaykos:** So how can we appeal to the rest of the country—even though they do think that it’s two years down the road and they don’t need to be giving money anymore. How can we appeal to them and show them that there’s this gigantic need?

**Jones:** I don’t think that it’s going to be an easy task to try to show them, and I’ll tell you. When the decline in funding and volunteers began was after New Orleans had their first Mardi Gras. When the nation saw that, there was a noticeable decline, and it’s been steady since that time of funding. People are thinking, “Well, they’re up to having their Mardi Gras. Things are close enough back to normal that they don’t need the help we were giving them.”

**Swaykos:** I see.

**Jones:** So those kinds of things, they come into play, and yet—
Swaykos: Do you think it’s better not to show progress?

Jones: No. I think it’s good to show progress. But I think it’s also good to remind people—and people are frankly sick of seeing it, the devastation. I mean, they’ve seen all the pictures, and it’s the same pictures because the work hasn’t been done. So you can take the same drive down the Coast and see a new building here and a new building there, but you see the same pictures of the same buildings. Now, media outlets aren’t picking that up because it’s old news. It’s almost two years old. Nobody wants to see it anymore.

Swaykos: Right. How do we give credit to people who have come down and done the work?

Jones: From what I’ve seen in the thousands of volunteers that I’ve come in contact with, they’re not looking for credit. They get their credit when they go home and they can think back and remember the faces of homeowners that they helped move in. And we do our best to try to keep the groups that come in updated with pictures of the houses that they worked on and those kinds of things because they don’t come down here for the limelight. Some—I should say most. Some do; some rarely do.

Swaykos: Have you had those?

Jones: We really haven’t because of the way we kind of spring our volunteers, and our volunteer network is an established one that we’ve had for a number of years, so not so much with us, but I’ve seen it happening here on the Coast.

Swaykos: Lastly, how has this experience affected you?

Jones: Well, that’s a tough question. I mean the first time I volunteered to help anyone was in a town called Baguio in the Philippines. And I went up there—it was about fifteen years ago now, I think, or seventeen years ago—to help the residents up there recover from a mudslide that killed about 7,000 people.

Swaykos: Wow.

Jones: And that’s the thing that changed my life, that experience right there. And that prompted me to look for opportunities to continue to help people. When I got down here I was surprised by the magnitude of the storm damage and the people affected, but I wasn’t so much surprised by how they were affected and how their lives were changed by the disaster that happened to them.

Swaykos: Right. Do you feel part of the South now?

Jones: Well, I probably won’t be moving back to the Northeast.
Swaykos: Really?

Jones: Yeah, I’m kind of going to be a converted Yankee.

Swaykos: Really? (laughter)

Jones: Yeah.

Swaykos: Well, how great is that?

Jones: Yeah, yeah.

Swaykos: That’s great. You’ve been living now—where do you live?

Jones: I live in the parking lot, right here. Living the dream in Biloxi in a trailer, yep.

Swaykos: (laughter) OK. When do you think you’ll be moving into a house?

Jones: Probably not.

Swaykos: Do you have a goal?

Jones: No, not here. Hopefully the hurricane season this year won’t be bad, and if Guardo(?) gets spared, and the Gulf will get spared, if something else comes up, we may end up relocating to another disaster area.

Swaykos: I see.

Jones: And there’s a staging area that we have in Birmingham, so it’s possible that we may end up moving back there and living there until something (inaudible) does happen again, so that’s kind of a long-term plan.

Swaykos: Well, thank you.

Jones: No problem.

(end of interview)