

Serving Dinner to Friends

By Stephen Rusiniak

From the book **Chicken Soup for the Soul My Kind of America**

If a natural disaster strikes your community, reach out to your friends, neighbors, and complete strangers. Lend a helping hand. ~Marsha Blackburn

I thought I'd feel pretty good after my first night of volunteering with the local flood-relief efforts. I was wrong.

My family had been spared during the storm and the flooding that followed in the wake of Hurricane Irene. I decided to help those who weren't. I was in awe when I walked into the church hall that had been turned into a volunteer command center. Meals were being readied for hundreds of flood victims; helpers scurried with boxes filled with donated items; several small groups waited in lines for their afternoon jobs, while those already assigned were leaving with tools and buckets filled with cleaning products.



And soon I'd be a part of this altruistic endeavor—a mere foot soldier serving in this great volunteer army, ready to do battle in an area that only two days earlier had been submerged beneath several feet of murky floodwaters. I was ready—or so I thought.

My team was given a simple task: remove the drywall and insulation from a home that had been inundated during a flash flood. As we neared our jobsite, what we saw was disturbing: At house after house and on street after street, the contents of entire homes were piled curbside in heaps, awaiting disposal. I felt like an intruder trespassing into the private lives of these people. But we had a job to do, and so we went to work. We labored for hours and when it became late, we wished the family well, and left for our clean, dry homes.

I felt an overwhelming sadness when I realized that whatever we might've accomplished, it did little to address the totality of needs facing this young family or countless other families suffering similar circumstances. I began to realize that what I'd witnessed far exceeded my comprehension of the sheer magnitude of the devastation.



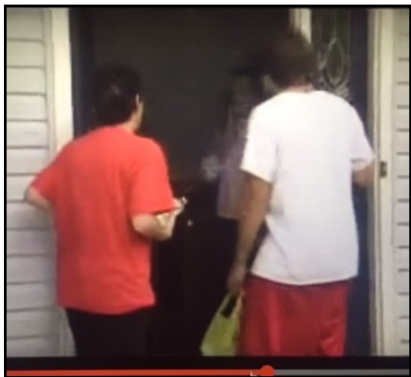
Later that night, I thought about the family whose flood-damaged home I'd worked in. When I put myself in their place, I realized that I would have been grateful for the help. We were not really intruders.

I had been depressed, but now I began to feel slightly better. Tomorrow, we'd try again—another assignment, another location, and another opportunity to make a small difference in the life of another family.

The waters receded, and families slowly began returning, determined to rebuild their damaged homes and shattered lives. At the same time, I became part of a distribution team that went into the devastated areas delivering hot meals. In the days that followed, we got to know many of the victims, people who'd lost everything and somehow remained thankful for the opportunity to start over. We also met formerly flooded residents who surprisingly declined our free meals and asked that they be delivered to the homes of their needier neighbors instead.

I was humbled.

Our deliveries eventually became opportunities for us to



My son, Michael with fellow team member, Robyn delivering meals to flooded family

have conversations with those we were serving. The simple thank-yous we'd received in the beginning soon morphed into longer, more heartfelt expressions of gratitude. More often than not, they came with hugs and, sometimes, tears. Something else was happening, too, that I'd yet to understand. My wife, Karen, who also volunteered, said she felt it as well. One afternoon, she told me what it was.

After bringing meals to yet another home, Karen mentioned how she'd gotten to know many of the families on our delivery route. She knew their problems and learned their stories. She said that she was no longer just bringing hot meals to victims; she was now serving dinner to friends.

And, of course, she was.

Since the hurricane, I've come to realize that as much as I'd like to lend assistance to everyone in need and to feed everyone who may be hungry, I can't. Mother Teresa once said, "If you can't feed one hundred people, feed one." I get it now. Following Irene, my little team served more than one thousand meals to those in need—no, wait, we served more than one thousand dinners to friends.

Finally, I'm starting to feel good.

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(Note: Photos not published in book)

the backstory:

The hurricane came roaring up the coast leaving a trail of utter destruction in its wake. While our home and immediate neighborhood was spared, nearby, high winds toppled massive trees, took down power lines and flooded neighborhoods—many submerged under several feet of water.

Disaster relief efforts quickly sprang into operation.

Karen, Michael (our son) and I immediately joined in the relief efforts with other local volunteers. Our assignment soon became the distribution hot meals within the flood zones. For the



Residents returning home with their boxed meals

next 24 days, we filled my truck (and sometimes another vehicle as our individual team grew,) with prepared-hot meals and drinks.



Meals being assembled

While our work was certainly necessary, for a while it was depressing—that is until the day it wasn't.

Late one afternoon, as Karen waded down the driveway of yet another meal delivery, she said something that astounded me: she was no longer just bringing hot meals to victims, instead, she was serving dinner to friends.

And she was right. Moved by Karen's simple declaration, that night I wrote a piece about the work we'd undertaken using her statement as its topic, and as well, the title.

Serving dinner to friends appeared in both a local and regional newspaper as an Op-Ed. It was often shared online, and now, I'm proud to say, has been included in the book **Chicken Soup for the Soul My Kind of America**.



Meals being readied for distribution

by the way:

Besides Karen and Michael, there were a few others who spent many late afternoons and evenings with us as we visited home after home and family after family through out the flooded neighborhoods, and so to you guys, Wayne & Jackie, Cory & Jess, Robyn and Mike F, thank you being a part of our *little team*, for getting wet and muddy with us, and for coming back, day after day to do it all over again...until we were no longer needed.



Receiving flood info. Me in sunglasses, Karen too. Wayne & Robyn to the right

the photos:

Oddly enough, no member of our team took any photos while volunteering. My thanks to Rev. Dr. Karyn Ratcliffe for providing me with a few photos and to New12 NJ for their reporting from the volunteer center before riding along with our team as we delivered meals. The report they filed was aired the following night and today may be viewed by clicking here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZ44_gHxgRI



Meals & supplies about to be transported by canoe. Note the roadway

and lastly,

Chicken Soup for the Soul featured this story on their "**Motivational Monday**" Podcast. You can listen by clicking here: <http://bit.ly/2wbn9EG>