

District Volunteer Returns From Kentucky

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Children's Disaster Services Volunteer Joyce Smart returned recently from a deployment to Jackson, Kentucky, with gratitude in her heart. Smart had the opportunity to witness acts of kindness from those who had the least material goods to share. "I was so glad we could be a part of that," she reflected.

When the Red Cross put out a plea for towels to accompany hygiene items, Smart watched as 100 new towels were brought to the shelter for those who had need. She emphasized that some local people, whom she described as "the poorest of the poor," were helping each other. "They were helping out neighbors from the little that they had," she said.

The devastation from the flooding in Kentucky in July and August was emotionally moving. Smart saw one family climb into a helicopter to leave the area where their home had previously been, and they had nothing to take with them except the clothing on their backs. She said there are so many stories like this. "I just wish somehow people could go on one of these trips and it would make them appreciate what they have and be thankful for all that they have."

"There are sad stories; they're overwhelming stories," she noted. Smart met one couple there with nine small children, a kind of makeshift family cobbled together from their extended family who were unable to care for their sons and daughters. Another lady lost everything, and as so many others, she said "I'm not sure why I'm here but God must want me here." This was the phrase Smart heard often from the survivors.

"To see things like that in the midst of having nothing is hard," Smart added. But it's a resilient community. They will rebuild because they have to rebuild and they say, "We will make it." Smart noted the survivors could not relocate outside the region to avoid future flooding because "Who would buy a flood-damaged home?" Their assets are tied up in their homes and belongings, so there is very little left to start life again somewhere else if they wanted to do so.

If the flooding was not enough of a challenge, the coronavirus broke out in some of the shelters and also affected Children's Disaster Services and Red Cross volunteers. There was one shelter they visited that experienced a 100% COVID outbreak, so they did not go in there to serve. Smart said they were tested every morning, yet 40% of the Red Cross workers on the response site tested positive for COVID-19 at the end of the two-week period. "Thank the Lord I've been COVID negative," Smart said.

One of the Children's Disaster Service leaders on the project in Jackson tested positive for the coronavirus before the 14-day deployment began, and another four days before it ended, so the trip was cut short because there were not enough uninfected volunteers left to work with all of the children. Thankfully, the school year got underway and there were not that many children left that needed care.

Regarding other aspects of serving in disaster areas, Smart laughingly noted, "The accommodations for the volunteers are not the Hilton." She slept on a cot with a small blowup mattress and a sleeping bag, which she takes with her when she volunteers on these trips. Others used their blow-up mattresses to sleep on the floor to be a little more comfortable. The volunteers were housed at Big Sandy Community and Technical College in Paintsville, Kentucky.

If the sleeping arrangements were a little sparse, there was no shortage of food. Smart joked that although she loves bacon and other cuts of pork, she is ready to take a break from it because it was served at every meal. "Any way you can make pork, it was served," she laughed. Smart did go on to say she is grateful that there was plenty to eat and that a restaurant sent food, including vegetables and fruit, to the Red Cross to feed the volunteers. The local McDonald's also donated a freezer full of pancakes for their breakfasts. The children said they were the best pancakes ever.

Previously, Smart, who is a member at Valley Pike, has been deployed for two-week tours of service to Chico, California, Durham, North Carolina, and Beaumont, Texas. She has been serving as a volunteer since 2019, but she didn't travel during the pandemic. Instead, Children's Disaster Services workers made packets to be given to children who were in difficult situations caused by disasters.

Every deployment is different and the experience in Jackson brought both joy and some sadness. One incident involved people trying to break into the school where they were staying, which was located in a high drug use area, but Smart slept through all the excitement. She later heard a couple returning from their Red Cross deployment were in a car accident. "You just never know," she said. Deployments are fraught with challenges for volunteers, yet Smart asserted, "My suitcase is re-packed and I'm ready to go."

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