

# Member periodontists help identify Katrina victims

**T**wo AAP Diplomates, Drs. David Rosen and Stuart Segelnick, are members of the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT). In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, they were called to put their training into action along with teams of other forensic dentists, funeral directors, forensic anthropologists, psychologists, pathologists, medical examiners, and DNA and fingerprint specialists. Dr. Rosen, clinical assistant professor at Tufts University, studied forensics at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. Dr. Segelnick, clinical assistant professor at New York University, studied forensics at the University of Texas at San Antonio. In the following article, they offer an account of their efforts to help the Gulf Coast victims.

Nobody ever thinks it will really happen when they join DMORT. An interest in forensic odontology has led you to take numerous courses and participate in simulated airline disaster situations and, while it all seems interesting, you never know what it will be like in real life.

DMORT is one of 100 teams in the National Disaster Medical System which operates under the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). During a mass fatality where more deaths occur than can be handled by local resources, DMORT can be activated. Its mission is to provide scientific, compassionate care to the victims of a disaster and return them to their families. The team comprises private citizens with their own particular expertise and, when activated, they become federal employees.

Our story began on August 31, when an e-mail arrived asking if we were available to go where needed. After we responded "yes," we received several more e-mails that increased in urgency until a final message told us where to call to make travel arrangements to Atlanta. We knew we were going somewhere in the hurricane region in less than 24 hours, but we didn't know where.

Though we left from different cities, we arrived in Atlanta and traveled by van to a FEMA training facility in Anniston, Alabama. The group's anticipation during the three-hour ride was palpable. Upon arrival, we were briefed about the conditions in New Orleans. Shooting and looting were taking place, and FEMA officials were concerned about our safety. At 8 a.m. the next morning we were told to pack and be ready to leave on 15 minutes' notice - destination still unknown. A little after 3 p.m., we climbed into 13 vans and began a 9-hour ride, amidst military convoys, vehicles carrying building materials, and progressively more debris along the roadside. At the Mississippi border, we noted that gas stations were completely empty and headed toward one station that seemed to have the only available fuel in the area. The station was guarded by police and only government vehicles were permitted to fill up.

In Gulfport, Mississippi, we made our way to an airport and were taken to an empty building, much like a hangar, that had been partially destroyed by the hurricane. We were told it previously had been used as a meat packing storage facility. Some of us slept in the vehicles that night, but most of us slept in refrigerated, or "refer" (refrigerated) trucks that were outfitted with wooden slabs to hold the remains of the anticipated victims. While lying on those slabs, the image of the bodies that would replace us crept into our minds. It was hard for any of us to sleep because of the hardness of the wood and the noise and vibration of the diesel-operated refrigeration unit that ran constantly and blew a steady, strong flow of cold air on us. I don't think any of us awoke the next day without soreness.



A dental office destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.



(From left) Dr. David Rosen, Commander Cotton, and Dr. Stuart Segelnick. The make-shift morgue is on the left.

As members of "DMORT East," we were responsible for the recovery, transportation, and identification of victims from Pearl River, Stone, George, Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson Counties in Gulfport, Mississippi, in coordination with the Harrison County Coroner's office. Our assignments were to collect ante-mortem information from families and dental offices, conduct forensic analyses of the remains, and identify victims. Most of our leads came from family assistance centers that were operated by DMORT to collect personal descriptions of those missing as well as medical and dental records from surviving family members and friends.

At every morning briefing, our commander would observe: "It's another beautiful day in south Mississippi." And it was. Every day was sunny and 110 degrees, and the mornings and evenings were delightful. But we had no amenities at first. There was only one port-a-potty; it was left over, unserviced, and reserved for the female volunteers. An archeologist on our team, Richard Gould, led a group to dig latrines, aptly dubbed "Latrina Katrina." We had no showers since there was no electricity or running water. Our meals consisted of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). They sound bad, but actually they were pretty good.

Things gradually came together. The portable morgue unit was set up in six large abutting air-conditioned tents and the satellite communications trucks arrived, providing telephone and Internet services for us. We worked to the constant drone of generators that were set up everywhere to provide electricity. One day, a colonel from the Air Force base paid us a visit and asked if he could do anything. When we cried "showers!" he offered to let us use those on the base as soon as the water came back on. At first we took cold showers in the dark, then cold showers with lights, and finally we enjoyed hot showers with lights. We appreciated every small step. Looking upon the decomposed victims, especially a 2-year-old child, it didn't seem right to be so unhappy about our own living conditions because we were alive and our situation was temporary. Eventually, even the air-conditioning came

back on in the shower facility. What a luxury! It really makes you appreciate what you have when you lack the things you normally take for granted.

We worked with a select group of people. DMORT team members volunteer their time to help out and we have never met finer individuals. As a group, we developed strong bonds, regardless of what department we worked for or where we came from. The dental team was particularly outstanding. Dick Weems was an incredible leader who had a great deal of experience in



Dr. Stuart Segelnick and Dr. David Rosen lived in one of the "refer"—short for "refrigerated"—trucks.

forensics. At the conclusion of our two-week stay, our team had processed all of the victims and there were no more coming in. The ante-mortem section was working feverishly to find out all possible dental information. Our chief concern was that dental records might not be available for many individuals since so many offices had been destroyed. At this point, we could only reach dental offices that were out of state.

New volunteers arrived, including Art Sommer, another periodontist and AAP member. They would never be able to comprehend the sacrifices that the initial team gladly made to improve their living conditions. Air-conditioned tents were now erected and everyone had a cot with a sleeping bag. There were 10 more port-a-potties, washers and dryers had been installed, and a shower truck was on hand. This was now like a resort to us!

Before our flight home, the commander personally wished us each well. Sitting on the plane, we felt warm inside, knowing we were able to help the victims of our nation's worst natural disaster. We were proud to have been a part of this operation, but we were saddened by the devastation and loss of precious life. Having had the opportunity to tour the area and see the destruction firsthand, we could feel the pain these people felt. We accomplished a great deal, made new friends, and were honored to work with such outstanding people.