

UB Today

Why I Needed to Help in the Aftermath

By Stuart Segelnick, DDS '92

Editor's note: Following is a firsthand account by Stuart Segelnick, DDS '92, a forensic odontologist with a private practice in periodontics in Brooklyn. Deployed for two weeks to Gulfport, Mississippi, as part of the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT), he met two fellow volunteers in Mississippi and discovered they were also UB alumni: Kenneth Cohn and Ray Miller. The three dentists helped with professional and compassionate identification of hurricane Katrina victims.

After the September 11th terrorists attacks, I, like so many of my colleagues, wanted to help. However, after sending in all my credentials to the medical examiner's office, I was told that I did not have the proper forensic training. Besides, a sufficient number of dentists were already volunteering who had the proper credentials. After this, I decided that I would attain the forensic training and be prepared if there was another disaster. I trained at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, preparing for an unknown mission that I hoped would never arrive. Once activated by DMORT (part of FEMA), we were responsible for the recovery, transportation and recovery of victims of hurricane Katrina in the Mississippi counties of Pearl River, Stone, George, Hancock, Harrison and Jackson in coordination with the Harrison County coroner's office. Our assignments were the collection of antemortem information from families, collection of postmortem information from forensic analyses of the remains and matching comparisons to identify the victims. Most of our leads came from Family Assistance Centers, which were operated by DMORT to collect personal description information, medical records and dental records about the missing from surviving family, friends and acquaintances.

Preparing to leave, we had our staff cancel our patients for two weeks and called dental colleagues to take care of any emergencies or suture removals in our absence. Then lightly and quickly packing, since in past operations DMORT members were always put in motels or hotels, we were on a flight to Atlanta, Georgia. When we landed, we called our contact in management who said, "Great, now come on down."

"Come on down" happened to be to a fort located in Aniston, Alabama, which was a two-hour drive from Atlanta. It was midnight when I left and about 2:30 a.m. New York time when I got to Alabama. There I was given directions to a barracks to stay



UB alumni Stuart Segelnick, DDS '92; Kenneth Cohn, DDS '77; and Ray Miller, DDS '85, met for the first time in Mississippi.

Friday night. We met some of our teammates and from there, we were in a 13-SUV convoy to Gulfport, Mississippi, where I would meet Ray Miller, DDS '85, clinical assistant professor in the UB School of Dental Medicine; and Kenneth Cohn, DDS '77, a forensic odontologist with a general dental practice in Florida.

(Photo courtesy Stuart Segelnick, DDS '92)

In Gulfport, we made our way to an airport and were taken to an empty building, much like a hangar, which was partially destroyed by the hurricane and was said to have previously been used as a meat packing storage facility. Some slept in the SUVs that night. I, with some others, slept in a refrigerated tractor-trailer truck that was outfitted with wooden slabs to hold the remains of the victims that were thought to be coming. As we lay on our new beds (sleeping bags that we bought at a Wal-Mart in Alabama), we could only dream of the poor victims who would soon be lying in our space.

Waking up, it was another beautiful day in southern Mississippi, but to us it was a matter of finding the bare necessities. That first morning, it all becomes a blur; thinking back, we hadn't even built the latrine (dubbed "Latrina Katrina" by the group that thankfully dug that day). We were never so happy when the porta-potties were delivered, though most of us were also thankful for a shower at the base.

This was a very select group of people. DMORT team members volunteer their time to help out, and I have never met a finer group of people. As a group, we bonded very strongly, regardless of what department we worked with, or where we came from. The dental team was particularly outstanding. Our chief dental officer, Dr. Dick Weems, was an outstanding leader and showed that he had a great deal of experience in the forensic field. After our two-week stay, our team had processed all the victims' remains, and at that time, there were no more victims entering the morgue.

The antemortem 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 many offices had been destroyed. At this point, we could only reach dental offices that were out of state. Hopefully, that would improve as more offices reopened.

Before our flight home, the commander personally wished us well. Sitting in the plane, we felt very satisfied, knowing how we were able to personally help the victims of one of our nation's worst natural disasters. We were proud to have been a part of this operation, but also felt sad about the devastation and loss of precious life.

Looking out the window of the plane, we saw houses covered in blue tarps, protecting the homes from further damage after their roofs were destroyed. Each of us told the commander before we left that we wouldn't hesitate to help again.

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